



# Formafantasma

The Italian design duo on heading the GEO-Design master's programme at Design Academy Eindhoven, and the star students they hope will transform tomorrow's creative fields

INTERVIEW: TF CHAN



Formafantasma describes itself as ‘a research-based design studio investigating the ecological, historical, political and social forces shaping the discipline of design today’. This mission statement is as ambitious as it gets. But it’s apt for an outfit that, for over a decade, has constantly pushed the boundaries of design and evolved our understanding of the field. From its ‘Ore Streams’ project (2017-19), which considered the recycling of electronic waste, to the ongoing ‘Cambio’, which explores the ecological impact of the timber industry, Formafantasma’s work has inspired a new

generation to see design not just as a styling tool, but also as a transformative force in an era of uncertainty.

It is fitting that Design Academy Eindhoven would appoint the studio’s founders, Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi, as department heads for its GEO-Design master’s programme. At its launch last year, Wallpaper\* guest editor Paola Antonelli interviewed the duo on their plans to encourage students to »

Formafantasma’s Simone Farresin (opposite), photographed in his family home in Vicenza, Italy, on 24 August, and Andrea Trimarchi (above), photographed in Taormina, Italy, on 18 August

### ‘GEO-Design is about experimenting with the boundaries of your design education, transcending the design discipline itself’

‘go beyond the product and the object’ (W\*258). One year on and the programme description, unsurprisingly, shares similarities with the design studio’s stated goals. ‘It’s about an attitudinal approach,’ explain Farresin and Trimarchi. ‘Tapping into the politics that shape not only the discipline of design, but also the way we produce and distribute things.’ The design industry, as they see it, has not had a sufficient grasp on the infrastructures it supports and its ecological impact. GEO-Design aims to reframe the conversation so designers are taking on the issues arising from ‘design’s complicity across multiple industries, communication networks, and aesthetic cultures’.

The duo have been responsible for selecting both tutors and students, and creating the programme. The impressive tutor line-up includes the founders of renowned design studios, leading curators, and even an ethnobiologist, Meredith Root-Bernstein. Workshops have featured the Turner Prize-nominated Cooking Sections (W\*268), artist Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg and ‘scientist of smell’ Sissel Tolaas (W\*253), while among the guest lecturers are Teresa Castro, a historian who investigates the links between cinema and animism; Philipp Pattberg, a political scientist who specialises in climate change; and Paulo Tavares, an architect who researched the impact of colonial racism on Brasília. ‘GEO-Design will grow as an octopus, with a complex central consciousness and individual far-reaching tentacles,’ reads the programme description; the diverse curriculum certainly helps reinforce this goal.

The courses themselves are unusual: a highlight this year was Pedagogies of the Sea, led by design critic and curator Angela Rui and coinciding with her exhibition ‘Aquaria’ at Lisbon’s MAAT, on our relationship with the oceans. Student projects showcased on the course’s Instagram feed (@pedagogieseas) include a collection of postage stamps interrogating contradictory marine conservation policies; a book on a genus of sea squirts as a symbol of resistance to human exploitation of the sea; and an investigation into surimi paste.

At the end of the course, students presented their outcomes as part of MAAT’s public programme. ‘They had to engage in how to make their work speak to an audience, and how to present in an exhibition space,’ recall Farresin and Trimarchi. ‘Some students created small installations, others monologues and even ritual performances... It goes to show that GEO-Design is about experimenting with the

boundaries of your design education, transcending the design discipline itself and how it was theorised.’

This dynamic approach has certainly captured wider attention, but Farresin and Trimarchi admit that ‘education is an ever-changing organism’, and there is some fine tuning to do. ‘There’s a need to ground this in materiality,’ they say. ‘So for the year ahead, we’ll have more of a making element. There will be a ceramics workshop, and it will not be about contextualising ideas; you’re just going to experience ceramics: mould making, creating shapes. Then it’s up to you to link it with whatever else you’re doing.’

There is, of course, the question of what GEO-Design students will do once they graduate. ‘We’re not here to professionalise people. The whole idea is also to rethink the purpose of design school,’ say Farresin and Trimarchi. ‘We’re here to help students develop their critical attitude, and we hope they will take what they have learned back to their own discipline of reference. It’s the only thing you can do as a responsible educator.’ Within its own practice, Formafantasma has ably demonstrated the practical potential of this critical attitude. Following its acclaimed launch in London, ‘Cambio’ is now on view in Tuscany and will transfer to Zurich later in the year; with every iteration, its displays (themselves elegant and enlightening) are complemented by more and more real-world projects.

On the following pages, Formafantasma’s edit of creative leaders of the future run the gamut from former students Johanna Seelemann and Irakli Sabekia to established studios such as Superflux and Studio Plastique. Among them, the founders of Buro Belén – ‘who have been thinking about material research for years’, say Farresin and Trimarchi – stand out for also being GEO-Design tutors. It is not difficult to imagine these young creatives eventually making the same impact as ‘Cambio’, both in terms of industry practice and public perception. ‘They are all people who are, in one way or another, expanding the ways of practising design today,’ say Formafantasma, pointing out that their experience with younger designers should give us optimism for the future. ‘The next generation is much less attracted to design because of a possible glamorous side to it. They’re much more aware of the pitfalls of the discipline, and definitely more engaged. They want what they do to be meaningful, and they are adamant to contribute to the world for the better.’ ★  
*designacademy.nl; cambio.website; formafantasma.com*

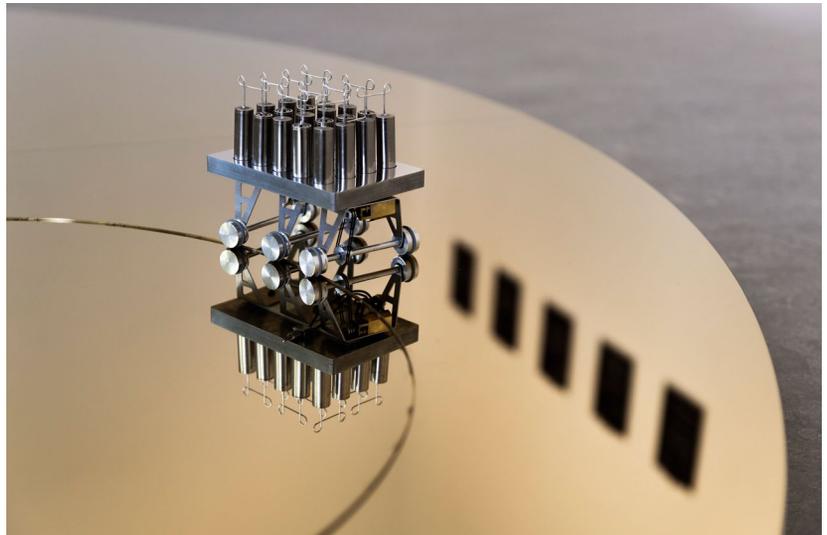
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Meet Formafantasma’s five creative leaders of the future



## 11. Studio Plastique

This Brussels-based studio was founded by Theresa Bastek and Archibald Godts, who met at Design Academy Eindhoven, where they 'found a common desire to address the many challenges our world is facing'. They do so by investigating production processes and their social and environmental impact; designing 'recycling scenarios' for objects; challenging common concepts such as ownership; and exploring the ecological and economic sustainability of design. For example, their 2020 project *Current Age* (pictured) looked at electricity and its indispensable role in today's society. 'There are so many ways of making sensible and empathic contributions as a designer and the world urgently needs those,' they say. 'Reaching out to others is key. Collaboration isn't just meaningful, it is also rewarding.' [studioplastique.be](http://studioplastique.be)



## 12. Irakli Sabekia

'Artistic work has a great power to make complex subjects approachable. It allows us to put down our shields and let the world affect us,' says the Amsterdam-based Georgian designer Irakli Sabekia, whose projects take on weighty themes such as spatial justice to spark powerful conversations. 'I think of my projects as artistic interruptions of functioning systems, aiming to create possibilities for the re-evaluation of existing structures,' adds the Design Academy Eindhoven graduate. One of his most notable projects to date is *Spring* (pictured), a 2017 installation consisting of 50 oak seedlings growing on ash produced by burning books; it symbolises new ideas 'unburdened with the weight of bygone ideologies'. More recently, Sabekia has been exploring memories of spaces that have been erased. He will be exhibiting at Eindhoven in October, as part of the GEO-Design platform. [iraklisabekia.com](http://iraklisabekia.com)

## 13. Buro Belén

Brecht Duijf and Lenneke Langenhuijsen met in Milan in 2011, as they were unpacking their respective works at Salone del Mobile. 'Our products had exactly the same colours,' recall the pair, who founded Buro Belén soon after. Beyond colours, the Dutch designers' shared interests formed a fertile ground for collaboration: while Duijf researched the reflective potential of materials, Langenhuijsen looked at how wood could be made flexible. Among their key projects so far is *Sun+* (pictured), a series of textile products questioning our relation to the star. But their latest interest is closer to home: the pair are now focusing on walls – 'they are our third skin in a way,' they say. For the duo, this focus on immediate surroundings should be a key aspect in a designer's outlook. 'Study your surroundings, and you will see possible projects that need a creative mind,' they advise. 'Don't think as big as the world's problems. It will kill your skill of seeing possibilities.' [burobelen.com](http://burobelen.com)



# 14. Superflux



Working at the intersection of the climate crisis, politics and artificial intelligence, this critically acclaimed studio was founded in 2009 by Royal College of Art graduates Anab Jain and Jon Arden. While studying under Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby at the RCA, the pair were encouraged to consider the implications of emerging technologies on modern society, which led them to create Superflux. The London-based practice ‘constructs narratives, worlds, and tools that provoke viewers to engage with the rapidly changing world’, explains Jain.

Currently operating out of Somerset House, the Anglo-Indian studio creates installations – from dining tables oozing with fungi to a high-tech apartment of the future – that make viewers carefully consider the planet. Among their notable projects is *Invocation for Hope* (pictured). Exploring the impact humans have on the planet, this installation of more than 400 pine trees is currently on show at Vienna’s Museum of Applied Arts. Up next is a film with Omidyar Network that explores capitalism, data, and the environment.

Weaving together a warren of themes, mediums, and technologies, Superflux is bringing conversations about pressing issues to the centre stage. Its work is evocative and visceral and challenges viewers to imagine ‘plural futures’. [superflux.in](http://superflux.in)

Photography: Gregor Hofbauer

# 15. Johanna Seelemann

The realm of conceptual design may feel nebulous, but Johanna Seelemann was drawn to the opportunity to approach design in an analytical manner. ‘In a world that’s full of objects, I always had a hard time justifying simply redesigning an existing object – what would I add?’ explains the German designer, who studied in Iceland and then at Design Academy Eindhoven.

‘The change of scenery from Germany to Iceland was a key event for me as a designer. There was a shift from the apparent abundance of everything to a place where nearly everything mundane is imported; a shift from aiming to protect nature, to protecting yourself from extreme conditions, and respecting natural forces such as volcanic eruptions,’ she says. ‘My understanding of available material and production completely changed, changing my way of looking at design.’

Since then, much of Seelemann’s work has focused on exposing the hidden networks of global trade. One project, *Banana Story* (pictured), created with Björn Steinar Blumenstein, charts the fruit’s complex journey, encouraging consumers to rethink the value of food and discourage food waste. ‘As much as I might want to point out certain issues,’ says Seelemann, ‘the aim of my project remains an optimistic suggestion, a counter-proposal, or an alternative possible scenario to the one I’ve explored.’ [johannaseelemann.com](http://johannaseelemann.com)

