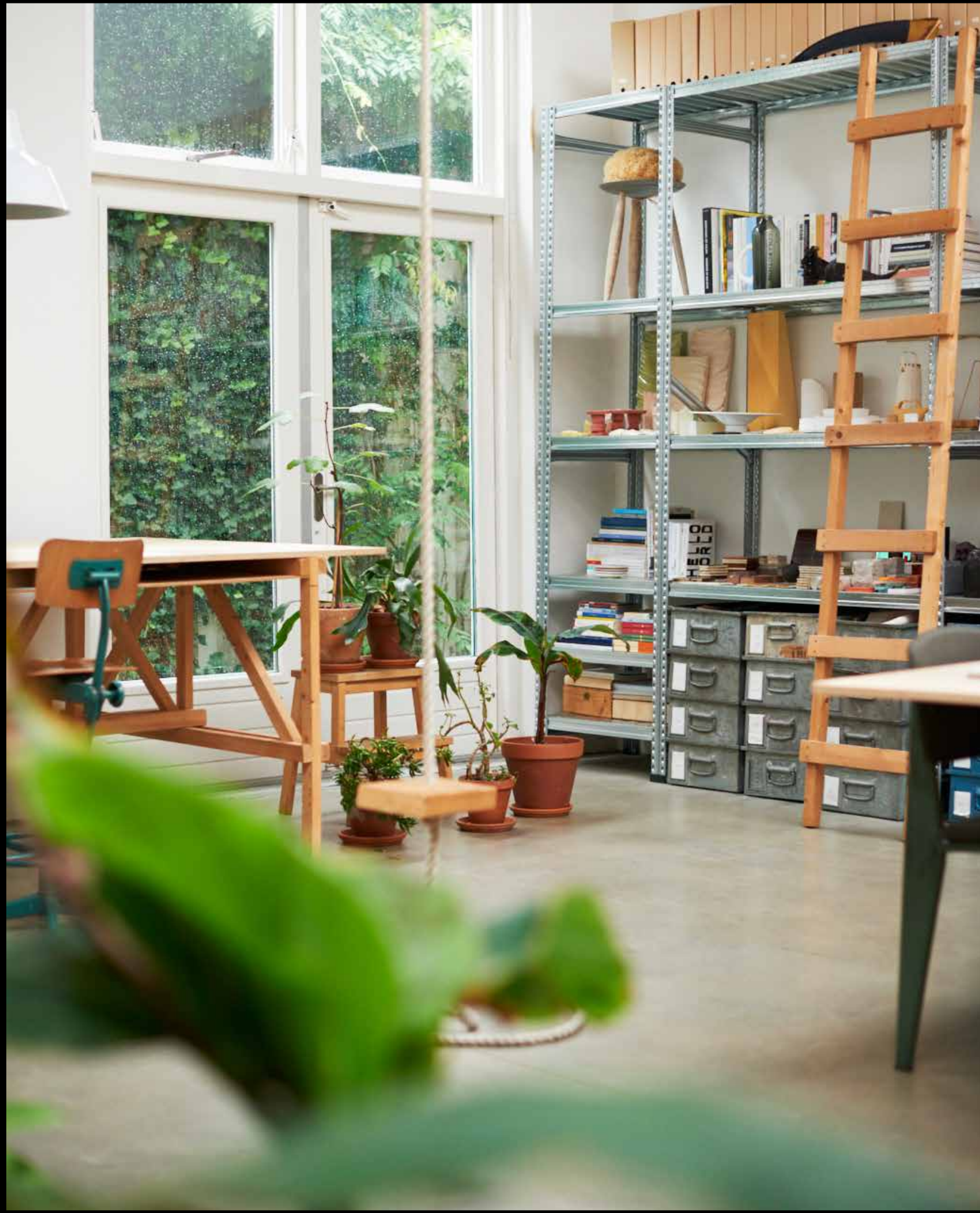


Studio Formafantasma is leading the way for a new generation of designers confronting the complexities of their role in a fractured world. Director of London's Design Museum Deyan Sudjic speaks to the Italian, Amsterdam-based duo about the possibilities and limitations of the industry today



PHOTOGRAPHY
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FORMAFANTASMA





Previous spread, left: Simone Farresin.
Previous spread, centre: Inside Formafantasma's studio in north Amsterdam, with the shelves displaying prototypes and books.

Opposite: Farresin and Trimarchi's desks in the seven-person studio.

Above, left: Farresin and Trimarchi discussing prototypes for the Italian furniture brand Cassina.

Above, right: The area surrounding the studio in north Amsterdam, an industrial district that has become a centre for creative industries.

Previous spread, right: Andrea Trimarchi.

In the 10 years since they graduated from Eindhoven's Design Academy, Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin have not shied away from tackling big themes in their work. *Colony*, produced by the pair in 2011, was on one level a set of beautiful blankets, commissioned by the Libby Sellers Gallery in London with collectors in mind. Yet on closer inspection it became an exploration of Italy's inglorious colonial history in Libya, Ethiopia and Somalia, and the interplay of that history with the present-day tragedies of migration across the Mediterranean: woven into the exquisitely soft mohair wool were images of colonial postage stamps and urban plans. A year earlier, *Autarchy* had discussed the self-imposed frugality of an imaginary community, though the title also echoes Mussolini's attempts to use self-sufficiency to get around League of Nations sanctions after his assault on Abyssinia. When Tri-

marchi and Farresin presented the project at the Milan Salone del Mobile – and they could hear an overexcited Enzo Mari, the godfather of radical Italian design, holding forth on the installation before they even got through the door – the pair knew they had arrived.

Formafantasma's practice is insightful and unexpected: *Ore Streams*, initiated by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne and the Milan Triennale curator Paola Antonelli, was a three-year exploration of the impact of electronic waste; *Botanica* imagined a world without plastics. But their output, whilst attention grabbing, is also smart and stylish.

Yet Simone Farresin is disarmingly candid about the importance of being realistic in our expectations of what design can deliver. By using computer waste to create very costly, elegantly sculptural desks embellished with gold

harvested from smart phones, Formafantasma are not suggesting that they can save the world one recycled hard-drive at a time. Instead, *Ore Streams* offered serious original research into the precious, toxic materials that go into a circuit board or a monitor, and what happens to them once they have been discarded. They raised challenging questions about the difficulties designers cause by making objects hard to take apart. And, alongside the research, by creating objects with the presence to display in museums, they are making an effective cry for attention: 'Just look at how valuable all these materials we abandon in life-threatening toxic dumps in Nigeria and Cambodia really are.' *Extinction Rebellion* it is not.

"I understand them, but there are different levels of intervention possible," says Farresin about the environmental movement. "Recycling





Paper and foam mock-up for the Delta collection



Material research for the De Natura Fossilium project



Craftica bladder container prototypes



A maquette in balsa wood

is not a solution. We need radical and visionary ways of thinking.” However he does share a pessimism about the future of the planet with the Extinction protestors. He takes the view that, in the long term, we are most likely not going to make it as a species and that the best we can hope for is a dignified exit. Farresin quotes Paola Antonelli: “As she says, ‘We are not going to survive’. We all know that we will die. But does that mean you stop trying to live, or do you live hopefully and with dignity?”

Formafantasma is at present a seven-person studio, set between the local Islamic centre and a Polish supermarket in an Amsterdam suburb, far removed from canal houses and museums. Trimarchi and Farresin are in the middle of another of the long-term self-initiated research projects that have defined their practice, even as they continue to work with such high-design manufac-

turers as the Italian lighting company Flos, Hermès and J&L Lobmeyr.

The current focus for the pair is the timber industry, and the results will form the basis of an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, opening next March. The Serpentine has given space to design only twice previously in its history, with exhibitions by Konstantin Grcic and Martino Gamper. “It’s intimidating when we look at who has shown there,” says Farresin. “It’s all going to be new work for the exhibition, nothing from the past. It is a challenge that requires a lot of self-reflection.”

Formafantasma is interested in the way timber is used, and what it offers. “It’s a living material, one which raises ethical questions about how we produce it. We will look at forestry, at how wood is cut and what the parameters should be when you strive for sustainability. Trees absorb CO₂;

it is stored in the wood. Whenever you make an object from wood there is CO₂ in it. When it is destroyed, more is released. If the object does not last longer than it took for the tree that it came from to grow, you are doing damage. Objects should outlive trees.”

Every new generation makes its mark by shunning all the most embarrassing traces of its immediate predecessors, and is then disconcerted to find that its own successors will eventually go on to reassimilate the very ideas it rejected. In the 1980s, when Trimarchi and Farresin were born, postmodernism was in the air and Philippe Starck was just setting out on a career based on whimsical shape-making and three-legged chairs. Greed was good, and the cult of celebrity was everything. This was the moment that the reputation of designer Victor Papanek was at its lowest.

The design landscape could not be more different now. Papanek, who was born in Austria, went to school in Britain and spent much of his life in the US, began his book *Design for the Real World* with the ringing declaration “There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few of them,” and then suggested that “by creating whole species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed.”

It’s an attitude that reflects the preoccupations of so many younger designers who try now to use their work to criticise a culture that produces single-use plastic bottles, fast fashion destined for landfill, unnecessary air travel and a meat-based diet.

Formafantasma share those worries, but have their eyes open to the complexities that are involved

in trying to resolve them. “As a student, I found Papanek fascinating but naïve. We are more sceptical.” Unlike Papanek, Trimarchi and Farresin are prepared to use the language of design to make highly political statements about these subjects that look disarmingly beautiful, and they have the skills and sensibility to do so.

They are also ready to create more mainstream products, such as the ExCincere tiles, conceived with the materials specialist Dzek using volcanic lava ash from Mount Etna – but they remain cautious about what they take on. “The furniture landscape is boring; even major companies are not pushing things forward, which is very disappointing. You get asked some very old-fashioned questions, like ‘Can you design a sofa?’, ‘Can you design a lamp?’”

Papanek described his position as being anti-design: He took the view that any kind of formal lan-

guage was essentially manipulative and dishonest, and that almost any relationship between design and commerce was unacceptable. Formafantasma have more to offer.

“We don’t believe in no form, though our name reflects that form is not the dominant part [Formafantasma translates as ghost form]. In the moment we live in, we cannot be ideological; things are more grey. We have to live with ideological and ethical ambiguities. It’s difficult for designers – you face the complexities of the world and are asked to participate in an exercise to rethink the profession.

“As a young designer, to approach all these problems can be overwhelming. We encourage our students to be exploratory, but not to be ashamed of scaling down ambition – you can scale up later – and, ultimately, be conscious that design has its limitations.”

Ore Streams is a three-year investigation into the recycling of electronic waste, documented through virtual and physical media. Referring to the rivers of discarded material – the fastest growing waste stream – which flow freely across national borders, the project explores this new, developing industry, highlighting the often poor working conditions in recycling centres in developing countries and the inappropriate disposal of toxic components. A website acts as a digital

dossier for consumers and manufacturers with case studies on planned obsolescence, instructional films on recycling methods and product disassembly, and a visual essay tracing the movement of minerals from an asteroid to the iPod. The project also consists of a prototype line of office furniture made from recycled computer parts and found objects that act as a ‘Trojan horse’, initiating a conversation about what Formafantasma calls ‘above ground mining’.





Formafantasma's research-based practice often involves various narrative threads that span multiple projects, presented through innovative uses of craft and mixed media. Colony follows the 2009 ceramic series, Moulding Tradition, with an investigation into the complex continuing geopolitical issues around Italy's colonial history in North Africa. The three mohair wool blankets – each named for a capital city held by Rome until the mid-1940s: Tripoli (Libya), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Asmara (Eritrea) – explore the effects of Italian imperialism on native urban planning, and the current relationships between ex-coloniser and colony. Architectural landmarks and maps of migration flows are woven together with historical texts, such as the recently reactivated Friendship Treaty, by which Italy returns migrants to Libya alongside investment in the country.



“Mount Etna is a mine without miners – it is excavating itself to expose its raw materials.”

Following the dramatic eruption of Mount Etna in November 2013, which sent a vast cloud of dark smoke into the sky, covering nearby villages and cities in debris, Formafantasma was led to investigate the culture of lava in Sicily and its potential

as a material for design. Informed by the work of Ettore Sottsass, De Natura Fossilium takes an elegant, varied approach, incorporating research into the tensile properties of volcanic fibre as a sustainable alternative to carbon fibre, the use of glass made from remelting rocks found on Etna and the CNC cutting of basalt. The works, presented through Gallery Libby Sellers in London,

include a coffee table made of stacked geometric forms, carved from basalt and joined with brass; a clock composed of three faces (for keeping seconds, minutes and hours respectively) that records the time in different ages of volcanic sand; and a series of box-like sculptures made from mouth-blown volcanic glass, a nod to the countless illegal homes to be found at the foot of the volcano.

