

Design, Reset

Alessandro Rabottini
in conversation with

Studio Formafantasma





Ore Streams (Cubicle 2 — Detail), 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: Ikos



Ore Streams (Table — Detail), 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: Ikos

*To STUDIO
FORMAFANTASMA, “to be
a designer in this moment
is challenging.”
In conversation with curator
ALESSANDRO
RABOTTINI, the duo—whose
research-based practice is
characterized by experimental
material investigations
bridging craft, industry, product
design and education—
reflect on the urgency linking
design to environmental
concerns and responsibility;
critical approaches to
sustainability; the role of design
in the future.*





ExCinere, 2019. Courtesy: Dzek. Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

Andrea Trimarchi (b. 1983) and Simone Farresin (b. 1980) are STUDIO FORMAFANTASMA, an Italian design studio based in Amsterdam. Formafantasma has developed a coherent body of work characterized by experimental material investigations, and explores issues such as the relationship between tradition and local culture, critical approaches to sustainability, and objects as cultural conduits. By bridging craft, industry, object, and user, they aspire to link their research-based practice with the wider design industry. Their work has been presented and published internationally at such venues as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the TextielMuseum, Tilburg; 's-Her-togenbosch, the Netherlands; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; MUDAC, Lausanne, Switzerland; the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina; and the MAK Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna. Trimarchi and Farresin lecture and lead workshops in universities and other institutions.

ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI is an art critic and curator who lives and works between London and Milan. Since 2017 he has been the artistic director of miart – International Modern and Contemporary Art Fair, Milan. Rabottini has curated many exhibitions in European museums and institutions, including retrospective presentations featuring Robert Overby, John Latham, Gianfranco Baruchello, and Ettore Spalletti, and newly commissioned solo shows with Walid Raad, Latifa Echakhch, David Maljkovic, Danh Vo, Sterling Ruby, Victor Man, Jordan Wolfson, Pietro Roccasalva, Keren Cytter, Adrian Paci, Tim Rollins & K.O.S., and Elad Lassry. As an art writer he has contributed to museum monographs on Paloma Varga Weisz, Cecily Brown, Dana Schutz, Ugo Rondinone, and Piotr Ukleński, among others. Recently, he has edited the first monograph on designer Michael Anastassiades.



(Above) *Cambio* – Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Royal Museum for Central Africa. Tervuren, Belgium. 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: Simon Ballen
(Right, top) *Cambio* – Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Val di Fiemme, Italy 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: K48 Productions
(Right, middle) *Cambio* – Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Sawmill, Italy 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: K48 Productions
(Right, bottom) *Cambio* – Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Thuenen Institute (Centre of Competence). Hamburg, 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma. Photo: Johanna Seelemann





ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI

Your collaborative practice began in 2009 with a specific focus on experimental design and research-based collections, but soon expanded to product design and the educational field. Before we delve into the details of your recent projects, if you had to briefly describe your practice to those unfamiliar with it, to draft a kind of DNA profile in terms of formal references and theoretical concerns, how would you do so?

STUDIO FORMAFANTASMA

As you probably know, this is a very difficult question because it inevitably requires simplification. But let's give it a try!

- Our work is collaborative.
- Our work is contextual.
- Our work is based on research.
- Our work is critical and, in the best cases, political
- Our work looks at the legacy of industrial production as the fundamental source of expertise while problematizing and addressing its historic contribution to environmental and social instability and its incompatibility with models of sustainable or even survivable futures.

ALESSANDRO

A concern with environmental issues has been at the core of your practice since the very beginning. Your latest collection, *Ore Stream* (2019), takes a narrative approach to the pressing ecological concern of electronic waste disposal, and by "narrative" I am here suggesting that your critical call for a responsible, non-extractive production methodology is conceptually and formally articulated by means of a limited-edition collection. An urgent concern is evoked here with exuberant and quite beautiful shapes. A process and a concept are "told" in an experimental form. Can you say more about how environmental issues manifest in your practice? And about the productive relationship you perceive between speculative design and design that can be mass-produced and largely distributed?

FORMAFANTASMA

We would not necessarily say that our ideas are articulated by means of limited-edition collections. Sometimes this is the case, but the reality is more complex. For instance *Ore Streams* is a body of work originally commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne and expanded in a second moment thanks to a commission by Paola Antonelli for the *Broken Nature* (2019) exhibition at the Triennale di Milano. When we started the project, the NGV was interested in commissioning new works by artists and designers for their first triennial. The museum recently started a furniture design collection, and that is what they asked us to produce. The commission was in fact for a museum acquisition. We thought that that was a reductive request, since the museum was interested in our approach to research. We saw it as an opportunity to use the economy of the commission to do something longer-lasting and more in depth than delivering objects, which in any case was mandatory.

The starting point of the work was the realization that Australian economy is still largely based on mineral extraction. Since the beginning of our studio practice, we have been addressing material extraction as a fundamental part of our research. But whereas back then, working directly with materials was almost intu-

itive, with *Ore Streams* we wanted to address more clearly how design is complicit in the transformation of half-finished materials into desirable products for citizens reduced to consumers. Design has often overlooked the infrastructure upon which it performs in favor of an exclusive focus on the needs of the user or even just more simply the market. (Let us clarify that when we talk about design we are not referring to just the furniture industry!)

So, to return to *Ore Streams*: if at the beginning of the work we looked into the geopolitics of metal extraction from underground, at the end we focused on the recuperation of metals "above ground" from urban mining. By the end of this century the majority of the metals we use for production of objects and architectural elements will be from recycled sources, which is obviously great since it is much less invasive. We decided to focus on e-waste because it is the fastest-growing waste stream and because our work and lives are so influenced by digital and electric tools. In the case of e-waste, because of the complexity of the objects, recycling often happens in developing countries where waste is dumped, damaging both laborers and the environment.

ALESSANDRO

What do the projects look like?

FORMAFANTASMA

With the aim of approaching design from a more holistic perspective, *Ore Streams* is a suite of office furniture but also a website that archives our research and a series of videos to be presented alongside the objects. The most important outcome of the commission is a video where we make use of 3D rendering, the tool designers use to shape products, to visualize pragmatic strategies for how to better design electronics to facilitate repair and recycling. It is almost a manifesto developed after extensive conversations with policy makers, NGOs establishing responsible recycling workshops in India and some regions of Africa, and obviously recyclers based in the European Union.

The furniture functions as a kind of Trojan horse to infiltrate the institution, translate visually some of the aforementioned issues, and address what design can do at large. The objects are in any case not a translation of the research, but rather a tool to engage with producers and to establish more transparent material sourcing. For instance the subtle gold elements in the furniture are plated with gold scavenged from circuit boards. All the aluminum we used is obviously recycled, and some elements in the glass cabinet are dead-stock computer cases that were supposed to be shredded. Finding these objects, understanding who is collecting circuit boards to extract gold and the companies processing them, was also a way to expand our applied research.

On a formal level, *Ore Streams* departs from a beautiful but misleading exercise very common in design education: to obtain 3D forms via the folding of a single sheet of paper. It is a fantastic exercise in efficiency, and if you look at it in didactic terms, it is still a brilliant assignment. But at the same time it reinforces a Modernist idea of design that seeks to minimize waste during the design process, which is an illusion of contributing to a better, less wasteful world. In fact, with mass production, waste is already minimal because it

is unprofitable. The objects are formally referencing this while visually incorporating piles of iPhones and computer cases as functional elements. They are layered. In a way they problematize design. ALESSANDRO

Many of your works seem to critique and offer an alternative to the detrimental impact of humanity’s social, economic, and political interests on the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants. It’s pretty clear that you are calling for a responsible political ecology in the field of design. The materials that you research and use are often the site for this critique, meaning that you look at their historical meanings and implications, current modes of production, and future uses. Materials seem to be the critical starting point of many of your projects. You look at the very core, the very substance, of the objects that we use, and in this sense we could speak not only of a political ecology but also of radical anthropology. How do you research, use, and choose the materials for your projects? For instance *ExCinere* (2019) or *Underground Release* (2017).

FORMAFANTASMA

These are all very different works. We are designers, and when we work we are not simply developing our practice based on our own personal interests. Often we react to specific commissions and operate very contextually. *Ex Cinere* develops further some of the ideas of a previous work, *De Natura Fossilium* (2015). In that work we looked at the Mount Etna volcano—but not as an inspiration. (Actually we hate to use the word “inspiration.” It always sounds like stealing!) We were interested in how the tourist industry exploits its magnificence and uses it as a form of entertainment. Considering that the volcano is still active, to us it looks like a site of production: a mine with no miners. It’s the mountain that mines itself and exposes materials. Also, as you know, when one speaks about design in Italy, it seems to only exist in the richest regions of the north. And we were fascinated by the idea to develop products based on a very specific condition or locality. *Ex Cinere* became a collection of tiles glazed using volcanic ashes. You may not know that the majority of ceramic glazes use metals and minerals mined from underground. Our glazes obviously are not. The product is not really designed by us—we don’t determine the colors—but by the limitations of its context. The nuances of brown are the result of the process. As simple as this might sound, it is radical because it implies a commitment to a specific context rather than the wishes of an industry.

ALESSANDRO

You put a lot of care into the contexts you operate in, and “context” can refer to materials, traditions, geographies, or processes. In many cases, you recuperate and revise traditional craft techniques by digging into archival materials, whether they are formal, written documents or informal, orally transmitted traditions. Can you say more about this? Do you envision in the future an extension of this approach to the very makers of your collections? Might you approach their labor with the same responsible sensibility?

FORMAFANTASMA

We will take this question and elaborate some thoughts that might not necessarily give you a straightforward answer.

We believe an important distinction should be made. While the notion of craftsmanship can be understood as the romantic idea exemplified by ceramic souvenir shops in Delft or Caltagirone in Sicily, craftsmanship as invoked for instance by Richard Sennett is much more than that. Craftsmanship we believe is the ability to participate actively in the execution of something. The idea of labor is basically the opposite of this—it is the reduction of the work of humans to the alienating repetition of a task. Thus, none of the people involved in the production of our work can be defined as labor because their participation is fundamental. When we work we are not really interested in understanding materials or techniques as traditional or contemporary because we don’t believe in the idea of “progress” or technological development as linear. In fact, anything traditional is also contemporary if its revival is meaningful. What we find interesting in the idea of traditional (preindustrial) production is the relationship between context, material, design, and execution. With the start of the Industrial Revolution the role of the designer emerged as a mediator between materials and their transformation into products executed by machines. This led to the development of a more detached perspective on production compared to the one of the craftsman where the sourcing of material, its refinement, and its transformation into objects was part of an unified process. In this light, we can state that design is inherently more preoccupied with the transformation of materials than with understanding and questioning their genesis. Design is applied to define what a material could become, not to questions of where it comes from. Minerals are extracted, refined, and transformed into half-finished products such as rods, metal sheets, or ingots, and delivered to producers to be shaped into new, desirable products.

As a design studio we are preoccupied with opposing this reality. We’ve developed our practice based on commissions from various industries but also independently. Most of the time we use the freedom of this approach to question the materiality of our own work. Our peripheral position to the centrality of industrial production allows us to pose questions and at the same time make choices.

ALESSANDRO

How will you convey and develop these concerns in your upcoming show at Serpentine Galleries in London? FORMAFANTASMA

The exhibition is titled *Cambio*. We are not going to present products but a research into the tentacular structure of the timber industry. The goal of this project is to put into question the role design can play in translating the emerging environmental awareness in the light of the current climate crisis. Wood was the first material in history humans were able to master, shape, and deploy in a variety of fields, from construction to toolmaking. It was harvested and used for millennia before techniques to extract and work metals were discovered, de facto making the thriving of humankind on Earth possible on a global scale. Nowadays, the ever-increasing consumption of wooden products makes the timber industry one of the largest in the world in terms of both corporate revenues and impact on our everyday life. This industry’s tentacular supply chain, heavily rooted in the bioprospecting of colonial territories during the nineteenth century, has reached every corner of the globe, long ago affecting the entire biosphere.

Situated in between the sourcing of raw materials and production, the discipline of design occupies a vantage point from which to look at the patchiness of the global timber infrastructure and its multiple scales. *Cambio* is an attempt to expand this space beyond the finished object and its disciplinary boundaries:

(Below, from top) *Visione Unica* (P2 (10’55”) La passione del Grano, Lino del Frà, 1960, Cineteca di Bologna) (still), 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma; *Visione Unica* (P5 (13’23”). Maschera Carnevale Tricarico, worn by Paolo and Giuseppe Fedele, Proloco di Tricarico) (still), 2019. Courtesy: Studio Formafantasma; *Visione Unica*, 2019, *Unique Vision: Cultures of Environmental Manipulation* installation view at I-DEA, Matera, 2019. Courtesy: I-DEA. Photo: Pierangelo Laterza



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forestry techniques and timber legislations then become tools for designing a better future for our forests, scientific knowledge goes hand-in-hand with environmental activism in fighting illegal logging, transnational geopolitical equilibrium is redefined in the struggle between conservation and consumption.

Some of the questions we are addressing in the exhibition are: What can we learn about climate change by analyzing its anatomical features? How can our perspective shift in looking at them as living archives? Would wood production change if it took into consideration the ability to sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere? The exhibition will use a diversity of media (site-specific installations, video, online content) to navigate through the global dynamics of the timber industry. The contents will be articulated according to a double structure. The first layer will explore the problematics of the timber industry as well as forestry practices responding to them, relying on the knowledge of a vast array of specialists: wood anatomists, botanists, environmental activists, foresters, producers, a philosopher, and many others will illustrate the conditions in which wood is cultivated, sourced, extracted, traded, transported, and manufactured. By introducing as acupuncture the work of all these different practitioners we aim to stimulate a critical debate between these disciplines and an expanded understanding of the environment. What are the parameters that define sustainability? What does it mean to extend rights to nonhumans? What can we learn by looking at how indigenous communities relate to their habitat?

ALESSANDRO

How do you envision the role of design in the future? And how do you view your responsibility, as designers, to the next generations?

FORMAFANTASMA

To be a designer in this moment is challenging. It is ethically impossible to avoid thinking about the global ecological crisis we are facing. Design sits in the middle of it. At the end of the day, design is the most human-centered discipline ever. Even now the only concern seems to be the fulfilment of human needs and desires. But to develop truly ecological thinking we must think beyond the human. We must in a way reset design. Obviously we cannot do that entirely, because before it is theorized as a profession, design is the innate human ability to shape the environment to conform to human will. Nevertheless we believe it necessary to interrogate the notion of design. To be critical of our industrial heritage.

These are some of the issues we’ll tackle in the master’s degree program called GEO-Design that we’re starting in September 2020 at the Design Academy Eindhoven. Our educational aim is to help a new generation that will obviously outlive us to also outperform us in terms of bravery and ecological thinking. And as a studio, we are aiming to develop a more radical arm where research and critical thinking can continue on a more independent path. The studio will also continue to work for commercial partners to finance the studio and research. When possible we will try to forge links between the two.