

# Herbarium of Interiors HEAD - Genève & India Mahdavi





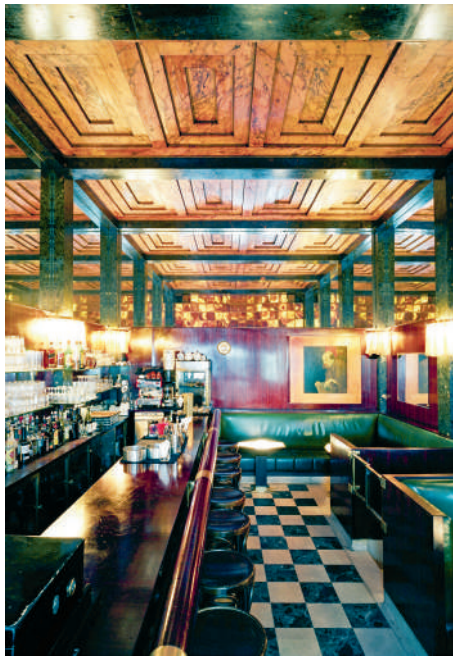
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# Preamble

**In 2018, HEAD – Genève created #LOOSLAB as an excursus into HERBARIUM OF INTERIORS. The installation explored the role of image culture in the construction of contemporary interior spaces and their associated media. The project is an illusion: originally modelled after Adolf Loos' American Bar and its successive iterations, the proposal seeks to document and reflect upon the re-samplings and manipulations of the original scheme. #LOOSLAB imposes its own representation of reality.**

**It is no longer a copy or a simulacrum but rather a ubiquitous instance of its original image.**





American Bar by Adolf Loos, Vienna 1908



#LOOSLAB by HEAD - Genève at Designers' Saturday, Langenthal 2018



OTTOBar interior by Supert+ on the secret terrace of Hotel Gabrielli, Venice 2017



OTTOBar exterior by Supert+, Venice 2017

## #LOOSLAB

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Randomly search online for reference images
2. Obliterate any difference between originals and copies, fake and reality
3. Sample/collage the floorplan as if cut with scissors
4. Copy and paste
5. Create a wooden 'real' structure as an inverted room
6. All materials inside are stickers, printed and pasted. Reality is the image
7. While embedded into the stickers, visitors become images
8. Ask visitors to enjoy a whisky - responsibly
9. Open only for three days
10. Take pictures, copy, sample, collage, and iterate elsewhere

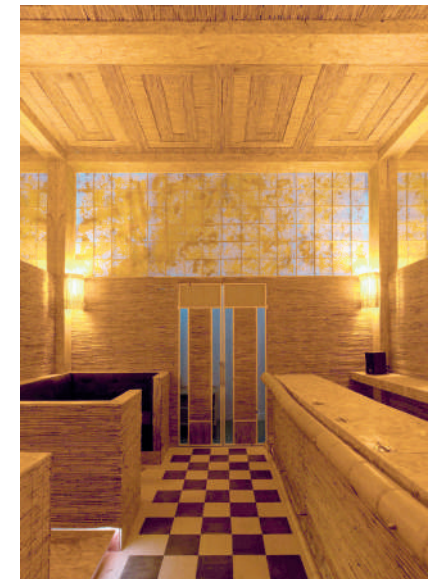
All images pages 8-11: HEAD - Genève at Designers' Saturday, Langenthal, 2018.



LAX bar installation by Christoph Meier, Ute Müller, Robert Schwarz, and Lukas Stopczynski, Vienna 2019

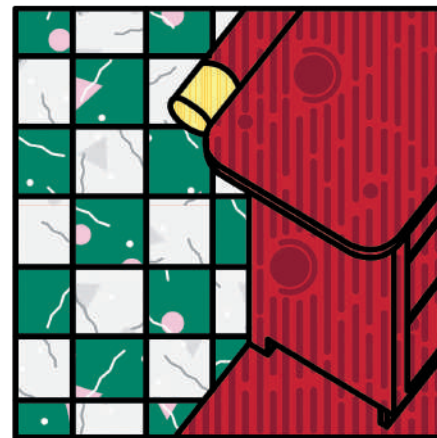
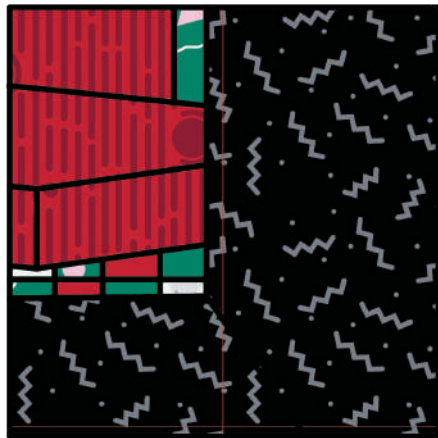
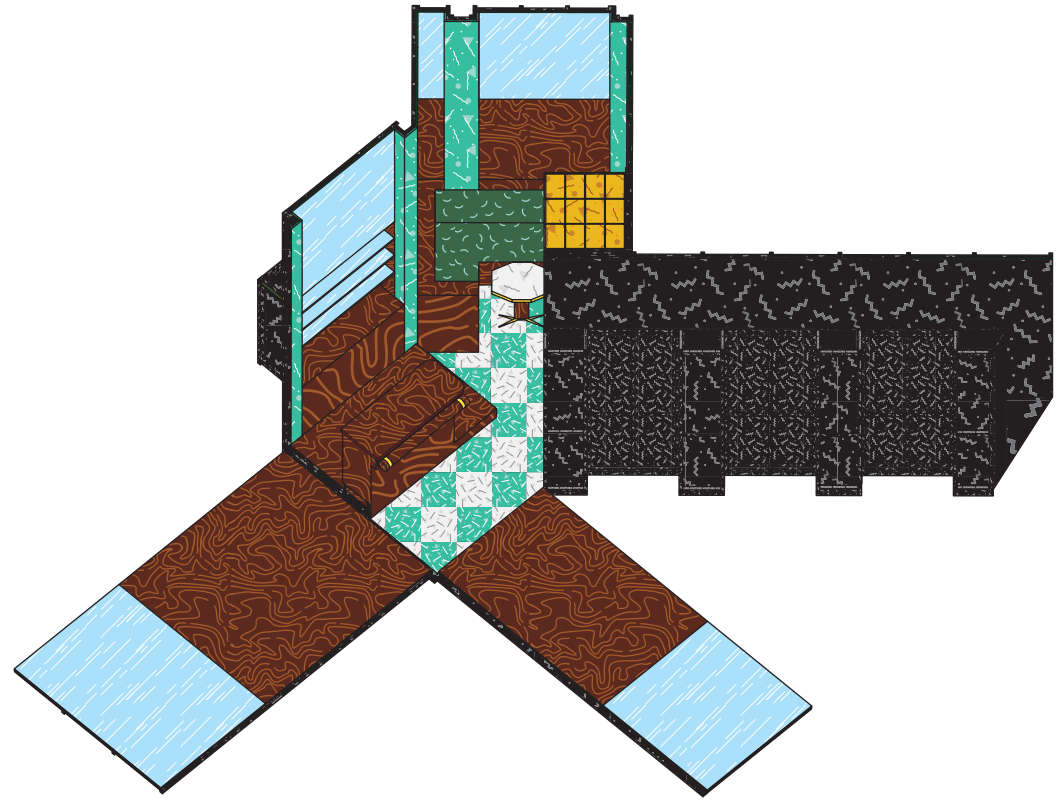


American Bar by Adolf Loos, Vienna 1908

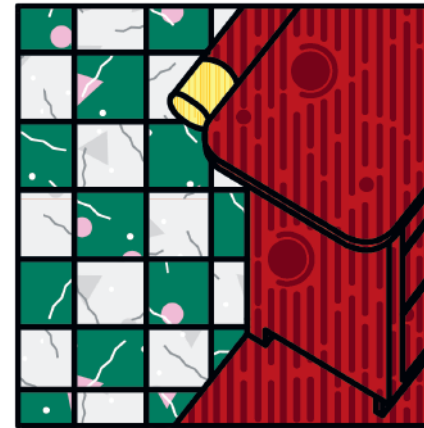


STROOKOFFER installation by Christoph Meier, Ute Müller, Robert Schwarz, and Lukas Stopczynski, Brussels 2017









## PROJECT CREDITS

Event  
Designers' Saturday, Langenthal, Switzerland, 2-4  
November 2018

- Awards
- Young Designers. Special Mention, Designers' Saturday
  - Nominated *Design Prize Switzerland Edition 2019/20* / Category: Spatial Design

HEAD - GENÈVE  
HEAD OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE  
DEPARTMENT

Javier Fernández Contreras  
DEPUTY HEAD OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE  
DEPARTMENT

Valentina de Luigi  
STUDIO PROFESSOR

Youri Kravtchenko  
ASSISTANTS

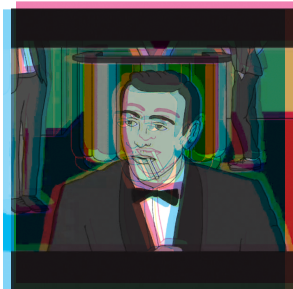
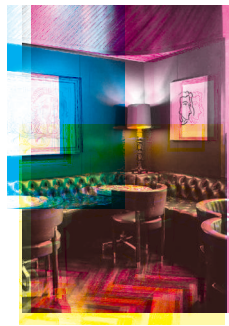
Florine Wescher  
Valentin Dubois  
Bertrand Van Dorp  
STUDENTS

Estelle Bérroujon  
Camille Berra  
Lolita Gomez  
Lucien Muchutti  
Jérôme Nager  
Xavier Plantevin  
Joëlle Progin  
Alice Proux  
Alexandre Simian  
Sergio Streun  
Fanny Teka  
Pascaline Vuilloud  
Marie Widmer

Special Thanks to:  
DIRECTOR. HEAD - Genève  
Jean-Pierre Greff







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**STATEMENT: TOWARDS AN  
HERBARIUM OF INTERIORS**  
HEAD – Genève & India Mahdavi

Few formats define more accurately the relationship between presence and obliteration than the herbarium. Deprived of life, the herbarium presents specimens that acquire a new condition in their timelessness. These are species that exist only in the space of representation, simultaneously the content and result of depiction, objects that become their own image.

Are contemporary interiors like herbariums, spaces whose image oscillates between content and representation?

When India Mahdavi designed the temporary restaurant The Gallery at Sketch in London in 2014, she created one of the most Instagrammed spaces in the history of images. In a unique collaboration, the Department of Interior Architecture at HEAD – Genève revisits with her a collection of mythical interior spaces that have been sampled and iterated endlessly thanks to their existence as image, appearing successively in different locations and temporalities while existing in the form of photographic, audiovisual or textual production.

Reloaded as a magnificent Herbarium of Interiors, these spaces no longer replicate their original images but their mythologies, experiences, and associated cultures.

This is the hypothesis that defines us today: to reframe the boundaries of interior architecture through parallel

space-image domains. To understand that contemporary interiors simultaneously belong to different places and temporalities, whether physical or virtual, close or distant. And to envision a new reality that bypasses traditional distinctions such as inside/outside, public/private, past/present, autonomous/iterated, or tangible/mediated, ultimately reasserting the role of interior architecture in the construction of contemporaneity.

**IMAGE, MEDIA, INTERIORS**

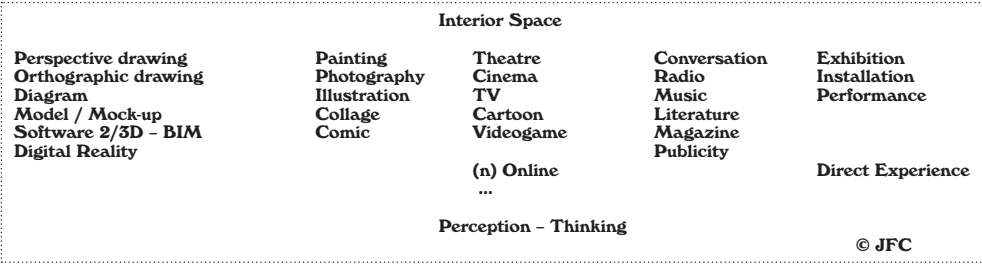
“I spent one year watching three films a day” – India Mahdavi

A herbarium is a specimen that becomes its own image. Halfway between picture, 1:1 model and object, it is sequential. Contemporary interiors are expanded herbariums. They are manifold, working in multiple directions, from object to image, from media to space. While existing in diverse media forms and formats, spaces become physical in varying instances and iterations.

Interior designer India Mahdavi keeps a graphic library of all the photographs she has taken throughout her life. They are printed, indexed, and accumulated as a massive encyclopedia at her office at Rue Las Cases, Paris. Her way of thinking about space is informed by visual culture, halfway between places she has been to and places she will never be to, as she proudly claims when referring to her young habit as a teenager of watching three films a day.

The reference to Mahdavi's quote is revealing in a world such as the contemporary, where contact with interior spaces is less produced through

direct experience, having been progressively replaced by ‘mediated experience’. Which media construct the relationship between interiors and their perception, between physical reality and the thought we articulate of it?



To raise this question interrogates the nature of the format of representation itself: ultimately, what is the format (or formats) of interior architecture today? The question is epistemological and affects how the discipline is envisioned. This diagram means essentially three things: 1) direct experience of space is a fragment in a larger whole; 2) the articulation between physical and mediated spaces defines contemporary interiors; 3) internet and online platforms multiply the complexity of this diagram n-fold.

Herbarium of Interiors critically re-centers the role of representation and media in the construction of interior architecture as *episteme*, discourse, and practice. Developed by MAIA, Master of Arts in Interior Architecture at HEAD – Genève, the project should not be seen as a historiographic excursus, but rather as an exercise on instantaneity, a *you-might-also-like* from online search engines where space-images are freely articulated with their re-enactment through different copies, instances, iterations, samples, and collages.

Sampling as a methodology to take a fragment from an existing source, manipulate and incorporate it into a new original work, is seen here as a clear redefinition of the profession of interior designer: a producer, an ‘*ensemblier*’

capable of collecting and modifying these new raw materials, whose vocation is to be continually transformed in order to create endless new relationships.

HEAD – Genève is as much a school of Art and Design as it is a school of transversal thought. Students naturally navigate between different departments, from cinema to fashion design, from space to media design. This matters because contemporary thinking about space is relational. When envisioning, talking, and thinking about space, society does not discriminate between different disciplines. Designers, artists, filmmakers, or publicists all inform the agency of contemporary interiors through multiple formats, temporalities, and intersections.

So does our vision.

Javier Fernández Contreras  
Youri Kravtchenko



## **A CONVERSATION WITH INDIA MAHDAVI**

A round table discussion with India Mahdavi, Javier F. Contreras, Youri Kravtchenko, and Andrea C. Dalmas hosted by Arjen Oosterman

**HEAD – Genève**  
**MAIA – Master of Arts in Interior Architecture**  
**December 2019**

**Arjen Oosterman:**  
What is your take on the theme of this studio, 'Herbarium of Interiors'?

**India Mahdavi:**  
Actually, the theme of this first Master at HEAD – Genève came out of a conversation with Javier and Youri. At first, I was very interested to see how both of them wanted to start intellectualizing interior design, which hasn't been done this extensively before. A very interesting mission. As a subject, interior architecture has become increasingly important over the past 30 years; before, architects were building, and now we're renovating. So, the interior has become a real subject on its own. Taking on that mission is really important. So, we were trying to reflect upon how we could do that, and how we could incorporate the students, the school, and the whole profession to get this set up. In order to do that, it is important to go back a bit, to place it in history. And then we came up with the idea of a herbarium of mythical places, of which most have disappeared, because, you know, you have heritage of architecture, but you don't have extensive heritage of interior design. So, we decided to go back in time and find spaces that had disappeared –or maybe had not

even existed physically – but had succeeded in creating a legacy that remains present as both actuality and myth.

**Javier F. Contreras:**  
I remember how, when we first met, we discussed that the very idea of a heritage of interiors cannot exist without their construction as media. The concept of the 'herbarium' is useful in that sense, because herbariums are simultaneously archives, 1:1 models, and images. We meet at a critical moment for the agency of interiors in the construction of contemporaneity: interior spaces have become expanded platforms and hubs that articulate both physical and virtual domains. They are manifold, working in multiple directions, from object to image and from space to media. This is the hypothesis of this studio, and this is actually the case with India's project *the Gallery at Sketch*: one of the most Instagrammed interiors in the world, which has been sampled and iterated in different physical and media formats.

**Youri Kravtchenko:**  
I believe that in *Sketch* and in your other projects there is a play with cinema: when you make an interior design, you actually make a movie, in a way.

**IM:**  
It's true, I like that people who live in these spaces are in their own movie, that they feel that they're special. I've always been interested in film culture, in movies, and in audiovisual thinking. That's what I wanted to do. As an architecture student, I spent a year watching three films a day. So, I brought my interest in this profession toward that and not the other way around. I try to take reality to a different level, in a way. And that the cinematographic

level is the right level for me, because it mixes a whole array of references. *Sketch*, in fact, houses several restaurants under one roof – all very different from one

## **INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPOR- TANT OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS – A REAL SUBJECT ON ITS OWN**

another, but all very intense, giving an overall feel of eclecticism. The commission for the Gallery, a nearby cubic space, was from the outset a set of constraints: there was the existing floor by Martin Creed and the walls were to be characterized by the drawings of David Shrigley. In this context of differences, I decided to reinvent my way of working with color, in a more radical way. I wanted the room to become an immersive experience, so I decided to do it all pink; it is the color *all over*. This pink, the color of childhood, the color of a girl, comes to embrace this cubic volume, masculine, without light. If you take a photo of yourself in that space, you know immediately where you are. That is an element I've always worked on. That's why color is so important. On the opening night, I realized that this pink hue gave a wonderful complexion to everyone! I hadn't calculated this cinematic dimension, I felt like I was in a Stanley Kubrick film.

**AO:**  
Can I bring in another perspective: emancipation? Do you think that interior design has an issue with that? You started this conversation with saying that architecture is becoming an interior design profession, because more and more we'll have to use and reuse what is already there, not to add something new. But at the same time, there still is a hierarchy between architects and interior

architects, where the former doesn't really acknowledge the expertise of the latter.



HEAD – Genève. Studio Herbarium of Interiors, Geneva 2019. Photo: Julien Gremaud

**IM:**  
It is true that architects sometimes reject interior designers. Whenever an interior architect comes to their project, they don't know how to handle that. Most clients don't want the architect to do it all, because they don't want to live in a concept: it is too cold. Being an architect and an interior designer myself, I see things develop more horizontally. I always go from furniture to scenography, from space to image, and I think the profession has to expand in that way. The discipline is evolving rapidly, and I think it should always be fragmental, an assembly of design capacities from different industries.

**AO:**  
Architecture has monopolized the notion of (spatial) functionality and delegated the emotional component to interior architecture – fine for 'them' to play with, if I say it crudely. In reconsidering the role of architecture, interior architecture, and design in this moment, this split is a problem. So then the question becomes: what should, and can we do?





India Mahdavi, 29 rue de Bellechasse, Paris 2020. Photo: Simone Bossi

What territory do we claim (and what do we not – we're fine with the engineer doing engineering), what consequences do we see for the curriculum?

**IM:**  
You're absolutely right about this split. There has been no clarity about the difference between decoration and interior design, and that's the difficulty. In claiming our profession as interior architects, we're also saying that decoration belongs to a larger whole. We have a story to tell about the content of the project we're speaking about. The landscape of French interior designers, from Andrée Putman and Philippe Starck to all the key actors today, is that there is always the narrative, always the content. Interior design becomes a whole, and not five walls put together, it becomes a space on its own.

## WE INHABIT A PICTORIAL MOMENT; THE SURFACE OF REPRESENTATION IS GAINING MOMENTUM

In the US, the way they show projects is only through elevations. There is no sense of space. In the European way of thinking, you create space as an entity. What is this space, how does it connect, what are the flows...? We can claim interior architecture as that.

**AO:**  
Javier, you mentioned that there is a critical moment in the present that you want to work with or work on. But is there also an urgency?

**JFC:**  
To the point that in the history of any discipline, you take the urgency of the

moment or you lose momentum. The epistemic ambiguity that India describes between the concepts of decoration and interior design is very similar to the one that existed between garden and landscape up until the 1990s, when the boundaries between architecture and landscape were critically re-explored. Now is the time for interior architecture, because in many countries, most urban fabric is built, and this quantitative fact is paired by an unprecedented circulation of images online. This is displacing the boundaries between surface and space, between representation and reality, which no longer retain their original meaning. Some authors have referred to the work of Fala Atelier and other young offices teaching with us at HEAD as "the pictures generation." It means we inhabit a pictorial moment, both literally and epistemologically, in the way the surface of representation – with its endless capacity to construct fictions and new realities – is gaining momentum. The implications of this paradigm shift can be traced back to the construction of modern interiors as mass media, as it has been explained by Beatriz Colomina, and they obviously reach into contemporaneity with the current explosion of social media and sharing economies. This is reshaping all industries, from fashion to cinema and product to space design. So, there is this quantity of physical space already built and the quantity of mediated space being circulated at a speed never seen before, which creates a unique context of opportunity for interior architecture.

**IM:**  
Maybe the future is only that: non-physical spaces.

**Andrea C. Dalmas:**

This kind of conversation always leads to the question: what's next? But it reminded me of the past, a project by Superstudio and their film, *Supersurface*. In the 1960s, they introduced this idea of non-materiality, a large surface connecting around the globe. Maybe it was a metaphor for what today is the Internet: everything is interconnected, all places are quite similar to one another. We have the sensation to travel and, like Marc Augé and non-places, because we're all connected, we share the same herbarium of spaces. Coming here, I was impressed by the methodology of going back to non-Instagrammed spaces. The students had quite a struggle to find the fragments and details. You go back to the physicality of reading books and digging into old documents. Because of this methodology, you come up with some ideas that are outside of this big surface that is connecting everybody.



Pulp Fiction & The Gallery at Sketch. Instagram India Mahdavi, @indiamahdavi. Film by Ana Tortos, 2018

Right now, coming back to the studio, I'm doubting whether to use this big system that shares knowledge or to refuse it, because that may be the only way to do something new or to have a different point of view.



**IM:**

That's the opportunity and danger with media, the whole has become an incestuous family of relations in fact. That is why I always work from my own library of images. All my photographs are printed and indexed, and I use them to collage new visual worlds that become spaces. My eye works like a camera: I've always had an awareness for framing and a sense of depth of field. Photography is important, I use it as a visual diary but not only that – I sometimes see better through a lens,

**AO:**

In music it's called sampling.

**YK:**

Sampling is actually one of the key operations we try to explore with students. In music, the hip hop producer is taking or appropriating music from others, bringing it together by the way he loops it, he creates a new rhythm that has little to do with the original part. There is a clear legislation in music, but in architecture we have a bit of an issue with this method.



India Mahdavi. The Gallery at Sketch, London 2014. Photo: Ed Reeve

in this sense, it becomes an analytical tool. My photo library plays an utmost importance because I have experienced everything I have photographed, and I can therefore metabolize the content: it is my realm of forms.

What is influence, what is stealing? Sometimes it is – like you, India, once said – just a metabolism: I influence, I digest, and it becomes something else.

**IM:**

I've been really thinking about this and

you know, the future is really about adding the experience part of it. Physical spaces will only be valuable if they can construct experiences.

I almost find it addictive to rethink the living experience of a space – a kind of spatial scenario. I normally try to work

**INDIA MAHDAVI: I WANT PEOPLE TO FEEL THAT THEY ARE THE ACTORS AND DIRECTORS OF THEIR OWN LIVES**

on two complementary, but sometimes dissociated domains: that of interior design (designing spaces to be lived in) and that of set design (creating decors to be filmed or photographed). I like to convey and use whatever I can find to express it: it might be an experience, a memory, or an impression that I capture. But mostly, with the spaces I create, and through the experiences they can enjoy, I want people to feel that they are the actors and directors of their own lives.

**AO:**

In the conversation so far, there is a strong emphasis on narration as the key component in today's design.

**IM:**

That's what I've always done. That happens all the time. But recently, narration has become something obvious and everybody is doing it. As for the results of the Herbarium studio: we started with a very conceptual framework, an intellectual approach. It was a whole new experience to bring the students together to analyze and pick components out of different mythical interiors. It is teaching them how to see something, how to analyze, how to make it their own, how to metabolize

those fragments – and this is really something we do every day in the creative process. The whole exercise covers a lot of elements that you use without knowing sometimes.

**ACD:**

The contribution I was asked to give aimed to enable the students to materialize their first ideas, which arose during the analyzing of the mythical spaces they were assigned to, into a physical object. The method that was implemented had its fundamentals on researching two pillars of an object, exploring both its visual and material reality, both its image and its substance. The route is far from being linear, as this study requires a certain agility to move to and from smaller and bigger scales – observing things from a few millimeters or from several meters away at the same time. The hierarchy of relevance pictured by a traditional pyramid that is based on the scale of things, from bigger (more important), to smaller (less important), is questioned and often flipped upside down.



Image library of India Mahdavi.

**AO:**

And Javier and Youri, what is your take on the results?



JFC:

Regarding the Herbarium studio, we are more interested in the hypothesis it opens up. We do not see results as individual moments but rather as part of a process in which they will be circulated, contested, and reshaped. Our idea is that contemporary interiors belong simultaneously to different places and temporalities. This new reality bypasses traditional distinctions such as physical/virtual or close/distant, legitimizing the agency of space beyond physicality. In that sense, we are incorporating designers from other disciplines into the conversation for the next semester, to understand how they deal with image-space sampling in their domains, from Irma Boom in graphic design, to CANADA in audiovisual production, or Philippe Quesne in experimental theatre. We are interested in understanding how visual and spatial sampling are operative domains in their respective disciplines, ultimately bypassing any dependence on a specific location or temporality.

YK:

In interior design, one concept that we use a lot is the mood board. We try to catch the mood of every project. It is a strong tool to educate, research and display. The translation from visual fragments to the assembly of physical elements has been very telling of what we understand by sampling. I was also very intrigued, or mesmerized, by how the model has created collective moments of work: this big model of a collective space with all the small fragments inside. We played like kids with toys and crafted the masterplan together.

This is rare in our profession: to be actively engaged in the real-time process of interaction and creation. True co-creation.

JFC:

Models are democratic objects: they blur hierarchies and fundamentally articulate the conversational dimension of contemporary design. I think that the combination of these three factors – democracy, transparency and visual inhabitation – turn the model into an object that cannot be substituted. Digital capacities have transformed design into a ubiquitous practice, and I think that in the coming years, the challenge will be on how physical objects and models can be collectively constructed from distant locations. The more remote we are, the more important simultaneous practices will become.



HEAD – Genève. Studio Herbarium of Interiors, Geneva 2019.

AO:

If you look at the work that came out of this studio, is that a promising step towards a professional practice, or is there still a lot to be done?

IM:

It was quite natural, how the students started with individual projects and then teamed up to further develop the selected projects. Simulations that are as complex as real life. Nowadays, design is conversational; there is no dichotomy between individual and group anymore. Designers work in networks, they're always connected to other designers and to society at large: clients, suppliers, regulators, etc. The studio was extremely successful in creating this condition.

YK:

The results are interesting in the idea of the invention or reinvention of the profession. It is as if the apprentice interior designers were not only engaged at their historical profession: *Ensemblier*, but also granted themselves complementary professional talents: producer, DJ or even better, recidivist plagiarists. In a classic acceptance, *ensemblier* is the person who chooses and coordinates various elements of a home decor, based on aesthetic and functional choices. More recently, in the cinema, on television, it is the assistant to the chief decorator, in charge of furnishing the sets. We find this semantic multidimension to be extremely contemporary. The idea clearly being to use the souvenir, or the image in the same way as the music producer uses the sample: a tangible, palpable, and modifiable material. In that way, we can consider the completed work as a success.

AO:

Can I move to another scale: society at large? Do you feel interior architects have a role to play when it comes to the big questions our societies are facing today?

JFC:

Definitively, yes. In the early 20th century, a significant production of architectural discourse was related to urban planning and the territorial expansion of cities, a process that has left its mark on contemporary societies. Today, especially in the West, the laboratory for architectural experimentation has shifted towards the renovation and mediatization of interior spaces, both permanent and temporary. All transformations in contemporary societies are linked to ever-changing interior spaces, while the facades of the buildings remain the same. The articulation of scenarios of equality, the reduction of energy consumption, the integration of social minorities and the respect for political, sexual and religious diversity are all social constructs linked with the techniques, materials, and iconographies of contemporary interior spaces.

AO:

Is there something like speculative design in interior design?

IM:

Any creative practice has an inherent speculative side to it. I have recently opened a new space on Rue Bellechasse, next to my office and showroom in Rue Las Cases, Paris. For me, it's a showcase, a gallery, but it's also a place of performance. It's like a canvas, a three-dimensional canvas that allows me to imagine all kinds of things. In the twenty years of my career, I have created spaces, furniture, and objects that construct universes and narratives in different locations. I have a kind of toolbox in this aesthetic world that is mine, which now allows me to use these elements to stage them in a more imaginative, more performative way, to imagine stories.



**I've always been attracted to this lag, to shift objects from their functionality to a kind of surrealism, as we see in these little films made with Ana Tortos on my Instagram profile. And then there's just the fun side, the entertainment side.**

**YK:**

The scenes – that interior architecture offers – petrify the new contemporary rituals as much in the material as in the forms, sometimes with a time delay but often with a time advance. As soon as we distance ourselves from the overwhelming, chaotic profusion of images, references, and appropriations that the real and virtual worlds offer us, we react, reflect, speculate, and attempt to freeze the image, to freeze time. It is extremely stimulating, not to mention the fact that the material or immaterial tools are infinite. I see interior architecture as a vivarium or a theatre stage, where we can look at human behavior as if in front of a stage or a window. We can then act or react on the rituals, the decor, or the way we look at the whole.

**JFC:**

The thinking and perception of space nowadays is produced through various media and systems of representation. In many cases, the direct experience of space has been substituted by texts, images, films, and digital platforms producing a new kind of relational thinking. Since the end of the 19th century, and remarkably in the 21st century, we have seen a hyperbolic acceleration in the amount and diversity of media – photography, cinema, television, video games, digital reality and, fundamentally, the internet – with the economic and societal implications all this has had in terms of the externalization of privacy and marke-

tisation of all aspects of private life, from cars to domestic spaces to clothes, which have significantly disrupted the typologies of spaces. What we are witnessing today is not just an array of space types, it is a sort of mix or contamination of typologies through various media. We witness an endless increase in the number of design practices dealing with the production of space and the absence of clear boundaries between them turns interior design into a multidimensional and speculative practice by definition. The future is interiors.



**India Mahdavi, The Gallery at Sketch. Scale model by Isabelle Blanc, 2020**



# Sampling: on Images, Media and Space



Lavomatic, unknown

“Sampling allows producers to take musical performances from a variety of recorded contexts and organize them into a new relationship with each other. It is this relationship that represents the producers’ art, and it is this relationship that reveals the producers’ aesthetic goals.”

– *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-based Hip-hop*  
Joseph G. Schloss, 2004



La Sieste, Jean-François Millet. 1866



La Sieste (d'après Millet), Vincent Van Gogh. 1890



Laverie automatique, Guillaume Bijl, 1985





**Bicycle Wheel**  
**Marcel Duchamp, 1913**  
1951. Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool,  
51 x 25 x 16 1/2" (129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm)

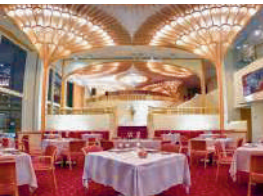
**Abstract**  
**Appropriation**  
**Assemblage**  
**Assimilation**  
**Citation**  
**Collage**  
**Copy**  
**Cubism**  
**Irony**  
**Détournement**  
**Found footage**  
**Metabolism**  
**Montage**  
**Reappropriation**  
**Recontextualization**  
**Reuse**  
**Recycle**  
**Sampling**



## 1. LOAD

take a sample from an existing source.

**take a sample from an existing source.**





## 2. RELOAD

manipulate the extracted sample.



### 3. UNLOAD

incorporate the manipulated sample into a new original work.



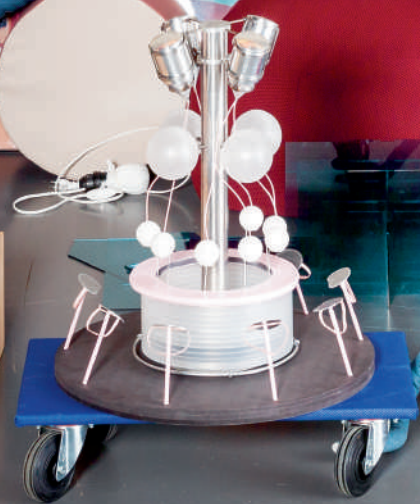


**From a  
collection  
of...**

**mythic,  
generational,  
public,  
interior,  
& designed  
scenes**

**To an  
herbarium  
of...**

**mythic,  
generational,  
public,  
interior,  
&[re]designed  
scenes**







Related  
Space  
Image  
practices

## WITHIN PAGES, BEYOND BOOKS

Irma Boom Interviewed by  
Javier F. Contreras and Lilet Breddels

Javier F. Contreras:

To say Irma Boom is to say one of the best book designers of all time. People from my generation have learned about architecture with books that you have designed. From your collaborations with Petra Blaisse to those with Rem Koolhaas, you are obviously a key reference for architects and space designers at large. We are interested in understanding contemporary spaces not just as physical constructs but also as domains that are circulated through different means and media. We think that all disciplines dealing with the production of surface and image through visual sampling and editing are informing the agency of architecture in critical ways. To that extent, your books represent simultaneously the most primitive and ultimate form of 'superficial' space design. From the endless material and tactile possibilities of their pages to the cinematographic condition of their layout, they epitomize the relational condition of contemporary design practices.

Lilet Breddels:

We also interview people from the music industry, where we would call it sampling, and maybe appropriation in the art world. So, how do you work with ideas of sampling or integrating thoughts from other fields or disciplines in your work?

Irma Boom:

I went to art school to become a painter. And in my work you will find references to art, specifically abstract art and conceptualism. Since my collaboration

with Rem Koolhaas, architecture became an important part of my practice. I don't think I have a working method nor a strategy. What do I do if somebody calls me to do a project? I think, 'Let's meet?' Meeting the possible commissioner is important. The first conversation is crucial, because of the mutual exchange of thoughts which I realize now more than ever with Covid-19 and new restrictions in place, that body language is vital. For me this meeting is important because I will invest a lot of time on the project, and sometimes it takes several meetings before I actually start to make the book: I always work in a collaborative way.

JFC:

You have mentioned your formative years at the AKI Academy of Art and Design. At that time, structuralism was extremely important in art theory but also in Dutch architecture. Your practice seems to simultaneously affirm and resist that period. So, I would like to hear more about how you remember the intellectual framework in which you were educated at the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s?

IB:

The art school I went to in Enschede was radical and liberal. The first week at school a Fluxus event was organized. It was completely free, chaotic, and for me, new. Lectures and guest teachers that emerged from the Fluxus period were coming to the school. Super exciting! I learned to think in concepts. The development of the individual and autonomous thinking was priority.

LB:

Were you influenced by music then, or now?

IB:

I love art, books, and music from the 60s like Jimmy Hendrix, The Doors, and The Rolling Stones. And of course, Bach is always somewhere in my mind. Bach's music is very structured. A student at Yale where I teach said to me: "Your works reminds me of Bach, it's so structured. It has such a rhythm. It's like music". What a compliment ... I never realized this myself.

After art school I started to work at the so-called Government Printing and Publishing Office in The Hague. I learned a lot there, in practice. At art school, as I said before, I learned conceptual thinking. The last project I made working at GPPPO was a book called, *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy*. It was a reader for a conference about the future of the world held in 1990 in the Stedelijk Museum, contemporary art museum in Amsterdam. The Dalai Lama was present, which was a wonderful experience. That project still has an influence on who I am today.

**EVEN WHEN THE IMAGES ARE A GIVEN, YOU CAN STILL MAKE A STORY THROUGH THE ORDER AND SIZE IN WHICH YOU PUT THEM**

JFC:

In some of the book designs from that period in The Hague you quote Malevich. I can think of other avant-garde artists whose production was predicated on the exploration of grids and distinctive geometric patterns – whether it's Agnes Martin, Mondrian, or Malevich –, but I would like to know if you also look at primitive or classic forms of art with recognizable visual structures.

IB:

I am interested in thoughts and concept. If it was only form it would be a superficial copy.

It is my deep interest in these artists and their thoughts [Malevich et al]. Yet, I live and work in the 21st century and my work is definitely made of the current time. The Middle Ages are also a huge inspiration. Books from that period look experimental and pure with 21st century eyes. The purity of the middle age portrait paintings, the strong colors, are very exciting. The first printed books after Gutenberg, the Incunables, they also have this pure and direct appearance.

LB:

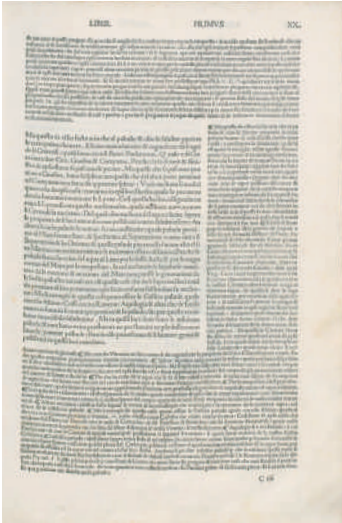
Can you expand a little bit more on the Rome experience, your studies in the Vatican Library? What do you find there? What do you think is so fascinating about it? And do you see it yourself already back in your work?



De Architectura (On Architecture),  
Vitruvius, written between 30 and  
15 BC. 1521 Edition



**IB:**  
In 2018, I spent five months in the Vatican Library. The Rome experience began with an invitation by the American Academy to be there as a resident. Rome is a city of libraries and that was my goal. At the Academy, the idea is that you connect to your fellow residents. There I met Peggy Brown, a lady who is 88 years young, studying as a mediaevalist at the Vatican Library. At a dinner we were talking about the Middle Ages and then at some point she said to me, after seeing my work: “You’re visiting all these libraries, but you should study at the Vatican library. It’s impossible to get in, but if you write a letter and if you can explain what you do and explain your research, maybe they let you in.” So I did. I had an interview at the Vatican Library and they let me in. First for 10 entrances and now, it is forever.



De Architectura (On Architecture), Vitruvius, written between 30 and 15 BC. 1521 Edition

I’ve made so many books already, maybe 350 or something. I thought all of the inventions I did were for the first time

in the history of book-making. Studying books in Rome made me feel humble. I did not know anything about books, book history. I know book design at the moment is super conservative and that is why I wanted to question ‘What happened to the book?’. If I work with publishers, it’s always the same story, every book would look the same. I think every book should be specific, because every book has a different subject and content. At the Vatican library, I am also studying manuscripts from 500 AD. I concluded, you don’t make books for this moment, but you make books for the future. Books are edited content in a bound, unchangeable form. It’s basically a container of thought. It’s something that you can refer to. Internet is flux, and is changing all the time, but the book, is a bound, printed version of unchangeable content. You can say it is one of the most stable carriers of information.

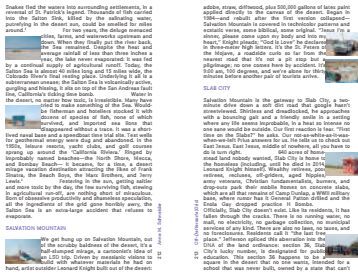
At the Vatican library, I was studying the books very precisely from the perspective of an editor and designer. All elements of the book: size; typography; structure; we take for granted now. I am now studying paragraphs, for example, when did the paragraph appear for the first time? Answer: Luther made proclamations in 1517. He wanted the people to read all of the text, so he placed the writing in different text blocks, and that’s the first time the idea of the paragraph came into being. These kinds of discoveries for me were super important. The idea of the page number, the footnote, and also the size and the paper of the book. So, every book I looked at, I measured and described precisely, and like Sherlock Holmes, I was looking into the typography with a magnifying glass.

I studied manuscripts, incunables, and books from the 16th century. Vitruvius’ *De Architectura* (1521, On Architecture) is an amazing book. Vitruvius was a Roman military engineer and architect. The book is a treatise which combines the history of ancient architecture and engineering with the author’s personal experience and advice on the subject. The structure of the book is defined by the content. The typography is based on content. During my stay in Rome, Richard Hutten, the industrial designer, asked me if I could make a rug for the Salone di Mobile 2019. I had many ideas but then I thought I should use my experience and findings from studying the books. I made a rug based on that structure of the Vitruvius book. The research at the Vatican library doesn’t just result in design for books, but it also inspires other design elements, like a rug!

**BOOKS ARE EDITED CONTENT IN A BOUND, UNCHANGEABLE FORM. IT’S BASICALLY A CONTAINER OF THOUGHT AND ONE OF THE MOST STABLE CARRIERS OF INFORMATION**

The book *Countryside, A Report* (Rem Koolhaas, Guggenheim New York) is the best example of the inspiration from my time at the Vatican. The oldest book in the Vatican is the Virgilius Romanus, the Virgil. It’s a poem on the countryside. When I found it, I immediately sent a text message to Rem and said, “We should use this.” Then I found out that the first printed pocket book by Aldus Manutius was also, again, the Virgil. *Countryside* has exactly the same measurements as that Virgil of Manutius from 1501. It was typeset in italics because that was more economical. Our book has a hand drawn typeface made by us called, ‘The Countryside’.

**JFC:**  
In *Countryside*, how do you create a sense of visual narration? Some chapters have large images that colonize the entire surface of the page and, inversely, in some others the images are miniaturized, completely surrounded by text.



Countryside, 2020, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, design Irma Boom, Guggenheim/Taschen

**IB:**  
Because we want to have the exact thickness and dimensions of the Vatican pocket book, I made hundreds and hundreds of models to get this size exactly. The first exercise I discussed with Rem was how can we make a very efficient book (like Manutius). I outlined a structure, everybody had to write a text of around 3500 words. Then, everybody would get 10 images in the same layout. So, the book would look totally full, no empty space, no waste of paper – using every page optimally.

But in the end, working on the chapters, the strict regime didn't work for all of the content. And that's why we sometimes needed a spread with larger images and sometimes images we could use small because of the content of the images. We gave the book the subtitle 'Countryside in your Pocket' to emphasize and advertise the comprehensive book. It's literally a Taschen book. Taschen also means pocket. For me, as a book maker, it is important that the book has a large print run. And because the book is so small it's not too expensive of course. When Aldus Manutius published his Virgil, it was one of the first democratic books in that time, with 300 copies or 500 copies maximum. That is also what I liked as concept for this exhibition: that the book would be the same price as the entrance tickets (for the Guggenheim). So, there's little excuse for not buying the book. It is something that you cannot resist. And that's also what happened. It's a bestseller.

**JFC:**

The physicality of the book in your work is inescapable. Over the last few decades you have witnessed and articulated the transition from manual to digital book design. This is different for digital natives, who sometimes are trapped within the image of the screen, surface within surface let's say. However, in your thinking process there is always a sense of depth, a 3D work reminiscent of its manual origins.

**IB:**

Yes, we call it AC and BC: Before Computer and After Computer (quote by Massimo Vignelli). I always work with models. For books, a screen is a dead-end story. A book is like architecture. That is why my own tiny catalogue is called *The Architecture of the Book*.

For countryside I made about 50 models. I always make models, because that is the only way to make a book. A book is a three-dimensional object. You need to see and feel the book. And size matters! On a screen you cannot see the size, paper, weight. A PDF has no size. And, InDesign goes from top to bottom; it is vertical, and a book goes horizontally. Making models are crucial to the object and the physicality, books are like sculptures. The mind and hands work together.

**LB:**

You have such an interesting relationship with the grid or the form, something also apparent in conceptual art, but what is often mistaken as formal or rigid, or too structured. But in a way it is almost the opposite as formal and that makes it very interesting that some people may not see that in the beginning.



SHV Think Book, 1996-1896, Irma Boom/Johan Pijnappel

**IB:**

Absolutely that is also when the big SHV Think Book came out. When it came out people said, "Ohh it is just a fat book", but it was not just the idea of a fat book at all. It came out of the idea that when Johan Pijnappel and I were working on the assignment in 1991, we didn't want to make a book, we wanted to make a CD-ROM, or something more progressive. We decided to make a book but one that

is completely based on the ideas of internet. It has no page numbers; it is a book you browse through.

**LB:**

The interesting thing there is that it is about the internet, but it is not mimicking the internet. A lot of other bookmakers were referring to the internet at that time but in a very one-to-one way.

**IB:**

Yes but also a lot of website makers were referring to the book. But you have to make something that is new, autonomous. That was interesting about the SHV book, we set some rules and then it basically it created itself. The book is now 25 years old and it doesn't look old at all. It could have been made today. The book is based on a strong concept.

**JFC:**

I am also thinking of the books that are collectively used like those in libraries, which are endlessly marked becoming deposits of accumulative information. I was wondering if overused or even damaged books become a sort of inspiration to you.

**IB:**

Absolutely! If I am in a bookstore I am never looking at the most pristine book. I think it is crucial that a book is used and gets marks. You see what people before me were interested in and what was underlined or marked. There is a life to the book, it is not art that you cannot touch. If it is not marked it is not used, it is not read. That also has to do with the paper quality we have now. If you look at the older books in the Vatican, the Vitruvius for instance, the paper had such a high quality, it stays

good forever. Only in the 18th and 19th century when the book becomes more democratic and the [print] numbers go up, the quality of the paper goes down.

**JFC:**

I always question whether it is more difficult to create images from images. I am referring to the contemporary overabundance of visual references and copy-paste practices. In your designs, however, the visual result is rather the outcome of a narrative and editing process.

**IB:**

I think the SHV book is an example of that. Apart from text editing there is also image editing and that is very important because that is the first thing people encounter with the book.

I learned a lot working with Rem with whom I made about 55 competition books where you have to explain a building through image sequencing. When I made the stamp books in the 80s I did the image editing which was quite exceptional for a designer in those days. You can tell a story but also disrupt a story. Even when you do a book for an artist where the images are a given, you can still make a story though the order and size in which you put them. Being a designer is a bit like a film director or a conductor for an orchestra. I do everything with enormous concentration and attention. I am super focused, and I do not compromise.

This interview was conducted on May 11, 2020.



## FICTION IS THE FUTURE

Lope Serrano of CANADA  
interviewed by Javier F. Contreras and  
Arjen Oosterman

Javier F. Contreras:

This publication explores image-space design practices that are informing contemporary interiors in different critical and speculative ways. We are interested in the cross-breeding between heterogeneous disciplines, particularly when it comes to graphic, textual, and audiovisual systems of representation. You are the principal at CANADA, a leading production company making commercials and music videos globally. Video clips are arguably one of the most hybrid formats in terms of media assemblage in varying space-time frames. You yourself are an illustrator, a creative practice that has informed some of your most iconic videos, such as *Crème Caramel* and *The Less I Know the Better* – for Tame Impala. How does illustration and other design-based or creative disciplines influence your work?

Lope Serrano:

When you're doing a music video, you are allowed to work in different layers of expression, because what you're doing is illustrating a song. So, it's easier to pass from live action to illustration in a music video than in, let's say, a feature film, where everything is stricter, and you're devoted to the task of explaining something. The nature of what we do is more open in terms of expressivity, and since it's linked to a song, it's very illustrative. Basically, you have to do something that you cannot do with live image; or you don't want to do it in CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery). So, you go to illustration, which is an

obvious statement of non-reality. If you want to see how a hand on a chest is looking for a heart and comes out, it is so romantic, it's so kitsch, it's so camp. But if you do it in a non-realistic way, it reduces the amount of kitsch, you know what I mean? So, illustration is like a wildcard. At least in what I do. It is not the base of what I do, but when I'm working in video illustration is like my wildcard to be free.

Arjen Oosterman:

And how does that relate to the endless amount of illustration and image that surrounds us, that ocean of visualization that you are part of as well?

LS:

You mean like, we as human beings?

AO:

No, you as a designer.

LS:

Actually, it's quite paradoxical. When you need to find inspiration, that is to say to find images, the easiest way of proceeding is to look for images, but that's the most frustrating idea. What you need to look for is for an idea, and from the idea images are going to come later. Once you have the idea, then you need to explain to the others without showing any screen. This idea can be a narrative, or it can be abstract or formal – you can have an idea of just talking about the nature of triangles, or about the pyramids, or about the Triangle of God. Then images come as a known part of your process. Usually, when you are commissioned the first thing you do is go for images, you go to the internet, you go to Tumblr, to forums.

That can be inspiring when it leads to ideas. But it's my advice to students that



Still from Rosalía: 'Malamente'. CANADA, 2018

the best way to find an image is to close the eyes. Because then it comes from something that is private. And then you have to do the effort to make it public.

**AS ARTIST, YOU HAVE TO BE  
AWARE OF NOT BECOMING A COPY  
MACHINE OF WHAT YOU LIKE**

AO:

Is that a concern, that it's private? That you're the initiator of the idea?

LS:

It's a challenge for a creator to look for the origin of what he is doing. I mean, you can copy, you can be inspired. By everything.

But somehow you have to be conscious of your individuality. And with some artists, this comes naturally. And somehow you have to be aware of not becoming a copy machine of what you like, because for me as a creator, as an artist, or as someone who is related to do visual expression, what happens? What happens commonly is that you're in love with a painter or with a movie or with a designer, so you follow him, you follow her. And that is stimulating. But you have to break that condition. Some artists do it naturally, others do it more consciously, but yes, it's something that I think of constantly, not being just a replicator of things that I like.

**AO:**

Does it also come with, let's say exclusion, in the sense that you try to block certain influences, to first understand what your own approach or idea or take is?

**"EVERYTHING IS LANGUAGE: THE COMMITMENT OF A NARRATION ESTABLISHES THE VALUE OF THE SHOT, WHICH IS THE MINIMUM UNIT OF MEANING"**

**LS:**

I guess you're sort of castrating yourself, or you're avoiding what you like in order to keep what you are. It's not a fight, it's basically a dialogue. You can be, let's say more genuine and more yourself for 75% of the work, and at some point you have this kind of moment of weakness in which you were more influenced by your masters.

**JFC:**

How do you relate to the space-time dimension in your work? I mean, in your videos there is always a sense of freedom in terms of scale but also in terms of montaging the moving image like multiple audiovisual collages as seen in works such as *Odiseo* and *Mujeres L.A.* In the video clip *Physical* for Dua Lipa, we can directly recognize the metaphor you were describing before: a hand on a chest looking for a heart, which constructs the narrative of the clip in different scenes, frames and illustrations. That way, your work is multidimensional in its treatment and manipulation of time and space.

**LS:**

That's at the base of being creative, I guess. When I was on the bike the other day, I was thinking of a sentence that I wrote: 'A wound that is a cave.' It's the kind of poetic sentence that you don't

know exactly what it means. But it's an example of what visual projects can provide you; it is an easy connection between things that don't look the same, that are not related. So, we are entering the world of metaphors.



Still from 'Crème Caramel' for Nowness. CANADA, 2014

A wound that is a cave can be an image of someone touching a wound and then an image of someone entering a cave. I'm saying this because when youngsters write ideas for music videos, they are shy when it comes to pass from the small to the big, from the present to the past, the inside to the outside. Editing is the most amazing thing that cinema has discovered. It is the only side of cinema that is just cinema. I mean cinema is theatre, cinema is literature, cinema is photography, but editing is just for cinema. So, time and space are 3d-related to the metaphoric quality of editing. When you're doing a music video, you have to imagine the power of three and a half minutes – nothing less and nothing more. When shooting a shot, we basically know what comes before and what comes after. And the way you're shooting the shot allows you to establish more clear connections to the previous one and following one. If you want to keep the continuity you have to be aware of what you were shooting before. So, in abstract terms, time and space are the constrictions and the boundaries that we have. And the way we deal with this is a way to finally find our voice.

**AO:**

You just hinted at flow and sequence as notions for creating the clip or the movie. But how does this relate for you with narration or narrative? Are these the same?

**LS:**

You have to pay a heavy tax for narrative in the sense that narrative needs to be comprehensive, it needs to be clear. If people don't understand the narrative, it's a failure. And if it's successful, it doesn't look like it has been built. It's great because it's the other way around. The fact that you have to explain something is a challenge. And it's also a proof that everything is language, everything is made of letters that create words that create sentences that create meaning. The commitment of a narration establishes the value of the shot, which is the minimum unit of meaning. When you do commercials or even music videos you have to push for a narrative. Basically, people want emotions and images and something that is cool, not something that explains an emotion; but I love to explain things. That's what I like the most.



Photo by Cecilia Duarte during the making of Tame Impala 'The Less I Know The Better'. CANADA, 2015



Still from Dua Lipa 'Physical'. CANADA, 2020

**JFC:**

How do you react to the way your work and CANADA's is received and circulated across social media and in journals? For example, do you recognize some shots or images to be more successful than others?

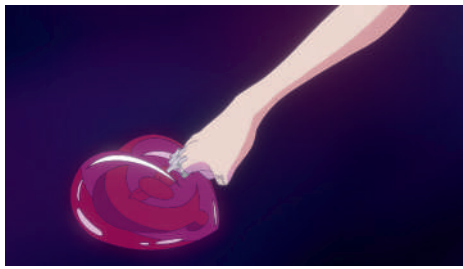
**LS:**

Basically, when an image becomes iconic or goes viral it's a mark of success on the intention that you had, which was to make it as public as you can. So, when you see an image that has become popular somehow you feel happy. It's about ideas and when the ideas are consistent, images become more natural. When we went for this Tame Impala music video, for example, once we set up the triangle between the Girl and the Guy and the Gorilla, there's a strong pole, which is the girl, there's a weak pole, which is the guy who plays basketball, and there's the strongest pole of all, which is someone that doesn't exist. In the context of a music video, if all the images have a consistent, single system idea, then the images, I think are stronger.

**AO:**

This is partly about recognition of your work in public space. A next step is appropriation. You'll probably also witness that material from you has been reused, sampled, whatever. What is your take on that?





Still from Dua Lipa 'Physical'. CANADA, 2020

LS:

Well, I do the same. I'm inspired a lot by other themes. If you see our treatments, they are full of references to other people. Sometimes it's arty, sometimes it's real things. I'm happy to be part of the circuit, of the cultural body. I'm very happy to be used and to be transformed into something different.

AO:

The video clip has a short history, it's a rather recent format and phenomenon. And in a way the same can be said about interior design. It has a longer history, but not in the sense of intellectualizing its production and building on that – completely different from the history of architecture in that sense. Does history in this meaning have a meaning for your work?

LS:

The fact that the medium is young, you mean?

AO:

Not necessarily that it's young. In architecture, theory is a big thing. It's something that you can't escape being an architect. You can maybe try to bend it or to change it, but you have to somehow relate to it. Interior Design doesn't have all that much theory, to be honest. So, in that sense, you could also say it's very free, very open. For video it's maybe the same.

LS:

Yeah, maybe. But, you know, I'm not convinced that most filmmakers are aware of the fact that the discipline has a theory or not. I'm not sure that affects the practice or at least not in my case. I mean, I studied cinema in school; more the theoretical side than the practical side. So, I guess that my approach to what I do is quite intellectual. But [it] doesn't make my practice better or easier. The theory side of my way of being goes beyond the need of plastic expression. In my case, they are connected to my person; I don't see that there is a breach between one and the other. Maybe there's a breach, but there is not a conscious bridge that I cross from being intellectual and doing what I do.

JFC:

We've been talking about you within the public sphere – imagery that you are inspired by and how society reacts to your work. Now, I would like to focus a little on the level in-between, which is you within the context of CANADA. You are one of its founders. Nowadays, the company has grown bigger with around twenty people in the team, directing music videos that might go beyond your immediate artistic ground, such as *Malamente*, for Rosalía. How do you keep the balance between having an organization which is very iconic for each work, and then leaving room for individual creativity within this ecosystem that CANADA is?

LS:

Well, I'm trying to focus on my work on what I do, and that what I do works and that it's something well done. The projects that everyone is doing sometimes have limits and conditions that place the style in second place. We are a company,

and we try to do things in the best way possible. But we are dealing with reality and in dealing with reality everyone has their own answers, meaning that each director is selecting and focusing the projects in the way they feel and the way the agency wants. That is one side. And then there is the idea that CANADA is something that started with just Nicolás Méndez and myself when we created this some 10 years ago. CANADA was a way of putting a name on the things that we did separately under the same concept, and it was something that we could not describe. Because it's like when someone asks you what your style is; I don't know what my style is, I do what I do. It's our task to put some magic to what we do.

idea. But you know what, it's not something that has ever worried me. We never tried to make something look like CANADA, but what we did was looking for ideas that we like, and then these ideas are approved and they pay for the videos and you are able to shoot the ideas and edit the ideas and when these ideas become popular you got it. It's not that we work with a pattern. It's more spontaneous.

**YOU HAVE TO CREATE THE IMAGE THAT CAN TRANSMIT AN EMOTION. THAT IS THE PROCESS OF BEING AN ARTIST**



Still from 'Crème Caramel' for Nowness. CANADA, 2014

And we were sure that we had things in common because we liked the same movies, we liked the same music videos, loved the same music. We were friends and we shared the same sensibility. So, CANADA was the name of putting our different tastes in the same drawer. The good thing is that the name CANADA allows – in its name – different approaches without losing a certain recognizable

AO:

Does it ever happen that the final material leaves the company without you seeing it?

LS:

Yes. It's not the ideal, I want to see everything that we do but there are projects that are solved in the process, when I wasn't present. And it's not my role to do all things that need to be done creatively.

I mean, my role as a producer, and as a co-founder or co-owner of the company, is to work for the best conditions for things to happen. Once a director, a man or a woman, is directing a project, I'm just there to watch it. And if I'm asked, I give my opinion. Somehow, I feel very happy to have created something that is bigger than just a personal tool, and that it means something culturally, or at least in cultural terms.



Still from Dua Lipa 'Physical'. CANADA, 2020

**AO:**  
Your practice is in between art and communication, in a way. Do you see developments in that area?

**LS:**  
Well, yeah, communication... I don't see the art component linked with the fact that we do communication. When you try to express yourself through art, it can only happen through communication. You want to be understood or at least to be seen. If something is art, it's because it's good. If it is not art, it is mainstream, convention. So, art for me is a gold medal. Art is communication. If it's art that no

one understands or that doesn't reach an audience, it cannot be considered a human expression. It is a mystery. It is always a fight, a clash. You have the emotion – this is beautiful, this is tender, this is tough, this is unfair, this is amazing, this is nasty, this is exciting, this is good, this is bad – but you have to create the image that can transmit this emotion. That is the process of being an artist. If the image is good, communication happens. The process is so cerebral.

It happens in the heart, but it has to be cooked on the brain. It needs to be created in a way that it is understandable for money and for a client. It's quite a mystery how something that grows inside you, invisible and abstract, all of a sudden becomes something in front of a camera and is working: When it works!

When it doesn't work is also a mystery.

**JFC:**  
I would like to end the interview with a vision of future. How would you like to evolve CANADA from now onwards? You already have an important career, yet at

the same time you are still young, which gives you the perspective to have a certain sense of anticipation. I am not talking in terms of size of the company but more in terms of field, practice of design. Would you like to move to longer video production or to explore other domains and new formats?



Still from Rosalía: 'Malamente'. CANADA, 2018

**LS:**  
Yes, fiction. I am looking forward to exploring what allows us to express emotions and different forms of reality. That does not necessarily mean a cinematic approach of fiction. It is more something that involves creating a character without this character being connected to reality.

It does not need to be a feature film or a TV series. I am sure that new formats are going to appear in the next five to ten years, associated with fast consumption and related to fiction in a way that we don't yet know; we do not know exactly the shape (of it), but it is going to appear and I think that the future of the company is strictly connected to this new age of fiction and entertainment. Fictional comment on reality. I don't know how, I don't know who's going to pay for it, or how we are going to create a 'factory of fiction'. But fiction is the future.

This interview was conducted on May 6, 2020.



## WORK IN PROCESS

Philippe Quesne Interviewed by  
Youri Kravtchenko

Yuri Kravchenko:

Today, you are the director of *Théâtre Nanterre Amandiers* and you are a *metteur en scène*, but first and foremost you are a visual artist. What draws me in to your work is your unique approach, concerning multiple points of view, which seems to be established as a clear working methodology. You now do a lot of staging which you refer to as stage writing, that is to say, you and the actors put together plays like *tableaux vivants*, using multiple references points. How do you sample and use these fragments through your own theatre? You use a lot of references outside of the theatre, in a relatively systematic way. How does this pollination of ideas and disciplines embellish your work?

Philippe Quesne:

That's a vast and beautiful question. I think I am indeed a good specimen - to use an animalistic term - and the term pollination which refers to bees that forage, share, and redistribute are remarkably familiar terms in my work. In fact, it's writing that leads to making shows most of the time, also some installations but overall I am a show writer: being a director is almost a secondary fact. The plastic and scenographic question is intimately linked to a writing process - a question that overlaps in all the plays I have been able to do with tributes or very clear quotations from the history of art. It can have its origins in old paintings, or references to the plastic arts... Simultaneously, we try to invent pieces from our own time, just as sculptors create installations or designers make

pieces illustrating moments in their society. Yet, I think I have subtracted to the point of trusting the spectator who can recognize himself in the elements set up in the theatre because the references are from a common culture.

The writing process is an open workshop with the actors, who sometimes are coming from the visual arts or other disciplines such as dance, sound, or music. We share a lot of books, collections, and rehearsals. It's not uncommon for the titles of the shows to be the launch-pad for the writing process while circulating around themes such as flight, ecology, art and survival, in the broadest sense... This gives rise to workshops where we work together all day long to invent hypotheses, rehearse situations, to show each other lots of images and films, and to also listen to music together. The dramaturgy is built with all of these materials.



'La nuit des taupes (Welcome to Caveland!)', 2016.

YK:

You usually come up with a title and some images at the beginning?

PQ:

Yes, it's very often a title. First, they position me as if I were the future spectator of a play which could be called, *La démangeaison des Ailes*, *La mélancolie*



'L'effet de Serge', 2007.

*des dragons*, *D'après nature* or *Crash Park...* These various titles contain thematic intuitions which allows me to approach and think with the team what themes they may refer to and arouse many questions relating to how man is located in nature and what we [as a species] do on this earth. Each piece then has its own theme that becomes a little tighter.

For example, the first month of *Mole Night* was spent collecting a myriad of references from Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' to images of the animal world, or from cave-themed theatre to films by Werner Herzog.

During the first week, a whole corpus of work takes place with the team which is intimately involved in this all-out search to really get us going. This is even before a score is invented, more specific to the piece, which requires us to make choices and very often leaves a layer of references, quotations, or highly visible tributes in the shows. One could thus recognize Roman Signer, a Swiss artist, in *L'Effet de Serge*; a solitary character who invents shows using special effects and explosives in his

apartment. The situations that nourished the actors, such as this DVD where we see this artist at work, can be found in the scenography. These elements are used in the writing and are part of the rest of the narrative to pay tribute to them. We even quote fragments of Shakespeare in *Fatal Farm...*

YK:

It's a polyphonic writing at the beginning: you place your images that you share in common into the process, then you synthesize yourself afterwards?

PQ:

Yes, I expect a lot from the group of interpreters. It's not uncommon that on some shows we completely make things all of us together. In *La mélancolie des dragons* for example, we did an inflatable workshop because I wanted everyone to make their own monster, in reference to Goya and his famous engraving, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. I then put the actors to work with tape and plastic sheeting. So, we go through very different processes depending on the show. In a show about ecology, we went for a walk in the forest and then transposed this universe into a wooden box.

Other projects would be to go and see paintings by Caspar David Friedrich to immerse ourselves in the life of this romantic painter from whom a show was taken. I like the actors to feel like they are back at school, going through the same materials, sharing common inspirations, and then making a show – conceived in a second stage.

**YK:**

There is a real appropriation of references. You speak, for example, of Caspar David Friedrich in particular, who is even quoted in the title of your play *Caspar Western Friedrich*. This appropriation is always cited very honestly: in the bookstore of the *Théâtre Nanterre Amandiers*, you can find a small shelf in which there are all the books used and referenced.

**PQ:**

This is the literary corpus that accompanies the research of the plays. While it has often been described as “theatre without words”, it is not uncommon to be nourished by complete texts. For example, in *Crash Park*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was a source of inspiration but there is absolutely nothing left of the original play but for the fact of having read it and having bathed the actors in an atmosphere of authors or artists who have already worked on this theme before us. In *La mélancolie du dragon*, a relatively autonomous fable about hard-rockers with a project idea to build an amusement park in the trunk of a car, the idea of making them with very fragile material came later. We looked at a lot of artists who had worked on mobile structures, such as the Atelier Van Lieshout and other relative references. Each piece is nourished in a different way.

For *D'après nature*, we had quoted Breugel's *La Parabole des aveugles*. If you compare the photos of the show with this painting, you can see that the artists on stage literally reconstruct the painting as a choreography. The reconstitution is almost physical with the bodies, the blind guide, etc. Even during the research for *La démanaison des ailes*, we liked what we found so much that the play begins with ten minutes of the ideal bibliography for flight and falls. Instead of saying a single text, the lead actor, recites the bibliography like a poem, so much so that the book titles right down to the names of the publishers sound like a sound performance of book titles forming the corpus of the show.



'Next Day', 2014.

**YK:**

A metabolism is set up, like digestion. The way you deal with references reminds me a lot of Francis Bacon in his studio, with images lying all around on the floor that would inspire him for his paintings.

**PQ:**

At the Decorative Arts, I did my training in scenography, which at the time was very open to visual art and space. There we had a teacher who provoked an interest in the relationship between the artist and his workplace. With Bacon,

Étienne-Martin, Giacometti, or Jean-Pierre Raynaud, we realized the obvious interaction between the place, the working method, and the references. I really admire the artists who acknowledge filiation, I think we need it. It's also a plasticity present on the stage, producing a reverie in the spectator. It's a bit like that, I hope, that people will also come to borrow my work. When you're rambling, it is necessary to have a plastic dimension that needs to incorporate its own references.

**YK:**

In architecture, appropriation and copyright are very little discussed. Whereas, it's completely obvious in music, and the borderline is sometimes blurred between copyright, appropriation, or theft. In your own work, do you have the impression it's 'pollinating' other artists or designers, or even being copied?

**PQ:**

There's an aural dimension that's sometimes also paraphrased, customized, or readapted... My work borrows a lot from melodies, it's not uncommon for them to be replayed with the instruments lying around on stage.

**YK:**

The flute, in *La mélancolie des dragon*, for example.

**PQ:**

Yes, or more recently, during the scene of scarecrows in *Farm Fatale* there are very simple melodies played with small synthesizers. The composition works as a collage and a reference mix; I like to borrow from existing material. Sometimes, it's rather improbable things, like mixing references to Yona Friedman with *Still Loving You!* It's a kind of herbarium, the way I perso-

nally feed myself, from Godard to Georges Perec to Fellini.



'Crash Park Circus' at the Biennale de Lyon 2019.  
Photo: Blaise Adilon

Copyright is relatively simple in the theatre: there's no plagiarism in what we offer and the musical rights are paid by the places where we play when famous tunes are performed. With old paintings, there are no rights to be paid. This being the case, I am depositing an original piece with very modest rights, since I am not a book author. I deposit the rights which are called 'set writing' from which many musical rights are extracted which covers a large part of the issue – since this is the most difficult part in terms of rights and loans. And that's normal. When you borrow a melody or when you play music on stage, you deduct it from the performance time and consider the music as inseparable from the work and the writing. Yet, it's also debatable because music is interchangeable. On the other hand, in the theatre, you can use music without calling the band or family of certain artists, such as the Rolling Stones or Michael Jackson: we have more freedom because the place and the theatre contribute.

**YK:**

There's another aspect of your work that is really contemporary: the image. You make images from scratch, a little bit



like a painter, and you often talk about paintings. What is your relation to the image and how do you translate the images into a physical reality? Can you explain this process that sometimes results in postcards of astronauts on the sea at the end of the world, or images of plane crashes on postcards as well? These are images that you don't necessarily see in the room itself but on a postcard, which shows what is at stake.

**PQ:**

The theatrical proposals I draw-up often show how an image is made: the actors or performers on stage are like those in a workshop. That's why the production project is very often an action with the performers on stage. We also have on stage this relationship akin to the photo studio, image machine, image factory, or landscape factory. What we often keep from a show is a significant memory or moment, but it is very often through photography that a piece is archived. Even though we make all the recordings in the world [of the production], there are often a few emblematic images of a show, like a visual production. So, I'm interested in the care given to the photo that validates the sequences. Besides, I work with a photographer called Martin Argyroglo



Workshop 'Thinking about the end of the world in costume by the sea', 2009.

who archives all my shows. For over fifteen years, he has been the photographer who guarantees an aesthetics of a living tableaux. He also archives the scene as a whole. At one time, theatre photography was a lot of close-ups on actors. I need to archive the scene like a terrarium, so that we can really see all the elements.

The images you're talking about on the postcards, these came afterwards with the idea of archiving a state of plasticity. In this case, I consider these images to be original and I recognize this in the works of younger people who quote them, and I don't mind as long as it's indirect. I didn't realize it at first, but there's an aesthetic influence on a lot of people, mainly in the theatre, or young companies that borrow from this style of Vivarium Studio.

**YK:**

You used references and you're now referenced by others, is that it?

**PQ:**

I think it's normal. In architecture or design, there are also major trends that are derived from earlier expressions. I feel it in all the arts, and it's fine. But a decor that is literally copied is quite rare. It's quite curious though because when I borrowed for the visualization of snow, a fairly banal image from the cinema, in a theatre scene with cotton and a few branches, it's as if it belonged to us. There are shows that have made history and I realize this in retrospect, even though anyone can buy a snow machine. It seems amazing to me now when people say, "Well, that's a bit like Philippe Quesne!" For example, take the fog machine which has been a recurrent effect in theatre. When I used it back in 2003 for my first play it was, for me, a rather pompous or respectable

reference to a director who used fog to make us believe in very serious things. Patrice Chéreau used a lot of fog in his plays. And when I brought it out, it was by making fun of special effects by reappropriating it to reference popular

**PQ:**

Of course! It's like the inflatables, for which we are not the first to use them. Things were done in the great eras of dance by Cunningham, Forsythe, by visual artists too, like Oldenburg, who collabora-



'Swamp Club', 2013.

superhero movies. Now, when someone pulls out a fog machine, which is about one out of every ten shows in the world, it's funny when people say, "It's a bit like Vivarium Studio." We don't have a monopoly; these smoke machines exist all over the night world. I've also taken the popular vocabulary of lights, lasers, colored lights... which very often we've turned to a rather cheap aesthetic.

**YK:**

Does it help you with the narration?

ted on productions with John Cage... When I do inflatable architecture in *The Melancholy of the Dragons*, we are also situated in this community of great utopians, that's popular culture. The inflatable form is very much associated with utopian movements. In the show it formally intervenes to recall movements that, with three pairs of scissors, some tape, and other simple materials, built entire worlds.

**YK:**

You talked about a herbarium, you called your company Vivarium, and the idea of

putting under glass or under a bell is also found in the idea of herbarium. Do you have a personal herbarium of images, of texts? I call on the example of Woody Allen, who has a drawer under his table in which he keeps his ideas, his gags, and when he is missing something he goes to look in this drawer, takes two of them and glues them together. How close are you to this approach?

**PQ:**

Yes, a lot of the time it's through the pictures I've collected but I'm also surrounded by art books that I'm quite fond of. Of course, these days it's also available via Google now, this giant searchable [virtual] herbarium. We put less aside in boxes. When you let yourself go in the Google constellation, the image search effect is quite dazzling.

**YK:**

To be very pragmatic, do you store images on hard disks, and are they sorted or organized?

**PQ:**

It's a delicate question: reference images are mainly kept in books at home. The images that fill hard disks are those of our work processes, rehearsals, shows. Each return to rehearsals is the occasion for a new show, it's a blank page and the imagery of each show is invented during its creation. It's a rather exciting process because a play begins and it's time to collect. For Basel, next year, in 2021, I'm starting a huge herbarium of images about the cosmos; about spaceships; about how designs have evolved in science fiction; about the prospects for new spaceship designs for the 2080s; and so on.

improvisation and at the same time the impression of an absence of methodology where everything is improvised on stage with the actors. Yet, there is also a rigor which bypasses some of the rules, like taking the images of the previous show and applying them to the next show, or giving them the title before even knowing or writing the play... Is it conscious?

**PQ:**

That's a good question, because it has become a method – I'm wary of the word dogma. I saw it appear a few years after I started, and I realized some decisions that were unconscious. The idea of taking the last image to start the next show was pretty clear. For me, it was also a very strong connection to prevent messing up: a combination of material allowed other options, so why not redo a show? It's a bit like a kit-game where you assemble each of the elements differently. If you look, you often have wooden panels, branches, a bit of smoke, or industrial spotlights: things that you recognize from one show to another. It's always the same, but never the same. I have the impression that I can produce new work with a box of old toys.

This interview was conducted on June 20, 2020.



'La mélancolie des dragons', 2008.

But that doesn't replace consulting art books, pictures, or even movies.

There aren't necessarily boxes full of cut-out thumbnails, the Internet has evolved this notion of a herbarium of cut-out images.

It's exciting, I'm alone and I don't have access to the actors for another year. The play is not yet in my boxes or in a notebook, but still, I start collecting.

**YK:**

I find that quite amazing in your approach. There is an element of



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**EDITORS**

Javier Fernández Contreras, Youri Kravtchenko,

Arjen Oosterman, Lilet Breddels

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**Team**

**CHIEF CURATOR**

India Mahdavi

**HEAD OF INTERIOR**

**ARCHITECTURE DEPARTMENT**

Javier Fernández Contreras

**DEPUTY HEAD OF INTERIOR**

**ARCHITECTURE DEPARTMENT**

Valentina de Luigi

**STUDIO PROFESSOR**

Youri Kravtchenko

**PRODUCT DESIGN**

Andrea Dalmas

**THEORY/JOURNALISM**

Lilet Breddels

Arjen Oosterman

**ASSISTANT**

Manon Portera

**STUDENTS**

Blanca Algarra Sánchez

Kishan Asensio

Dany-Sarah Champion

Nina D'Elia

Lolita Gomez

Camila González Tapia

Elizaveta Krikun

Filza Parmar

Karen Pisoni

Léa Rime

Marion Vergne

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