

MONITOR

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LIVING SPECIAL

Ronan & Erwan BOUROULLEC
Sinato Studio.Gang Šepka ZMIK Splitterwerk
MAU Tonkin.Liu Matter.Design Antonio.Sofan
H.C.Wang Ira.Koers LA[bau] SolarDecathlon
Shinichi.Ogawa Stephane.Malka Guise EDR ...



D/ 14.95 EURO .J/ 14.95 EURO .F/ 15.95 EURO



They started 10 years ago, and they like the idea of working half-way between industry and craft. Their client list is both inextensive and impressive: Vitra, Cappellini, Kvadrat, Magis, Established&Sons, Kartell, Ligne Roset, Axor, Camper, Issey Miyake, Galerie Kreo, plus a few smaller, craft-based companies — because they value «this history of family businesses that pass from cabinet-maker father to cabinetmaker son» as much as the possibility of reinventing some of the most traditional techniques and typologies. They are in no hurry: the rhythm of researchers' work in a university seems more appropriate than that of the fashion industry. By the very fact of designing an object they want to identify it, to make it clear and visible — and to ensure that the user feels totally relaxed about the result. MONITOR first met Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in 2000, and a major update sounds like a good idea... The conversation steered into designing for workspaces, as there are some new things in the pipeline for Vitra Office, but also because the Bouroullecs do not agree with the way things are organized in this sector.

What are the alternatives you propose? > Erwan: We are trying to deal with the entire workspace, to offer a different pattern of organizing a workspace — the one that doesn't necessarily involve the table, no matter large or small. For instance, we've designed the Alcove sofa that works very well in offices. For two persons, it can function as a kind of small meeting room, and being inside it really changes the quality of space. What we are looking for is a different typology, a different kind of body comfort, and an environment that doesn't confine you to one single pattern throughout the entire day. Now we are looking into the idea of a desk with adjustable height, the way they do it in Scandinavia where they respect the body and care about it. At times, during the day, they pull the tabletop up and work in a standing position. In this way, we can gradually add some missing typologies, and, hopefully, mix different genres. We try to find the solutions that would create not necessarily an interesting object, but rather an interesting space.

This makes me remember the quote I've seen on your website: less solutions — less problems. > Ronan: Designing for the office is a very particular discipline, and it stays somewhat apart from the rest of our work, but we've learned quite a bit from it... As Erwan has one said, this sector is ill. It suffers from conformism, it's ill with standards. Big manufacturers in this sector set extremely protectionist, almost absurd norms. Everything is subject to standard: a black table, you can't do it because of colour standards; a table that weighs 30kg to be easily moveable, you can't do it because of stability standards. Initially the reasons could have been ergonomic, but at the end they became totally inadequate. This sector has to be looked at from a totally different perspective.

I like this trend of combining within one space the situations and advantages of cubicles (concentration, privacy) and open plan offices (interaction, sharing). And the idea that with all our cell phones, WiFi and portable computers, a lot of people are no longer obliged to spend an entire day glued to their desks... And so an office layout can transform into a group of settings adapted to different working situations. > Ronan: Vitra and us were at the origins of what's happening now. At that time we were not familiar with the culture of teamwork: our team was just the two of us plus eventually a third person, and we've never worked for someone else. It was interesting to try and imagine the situations involving hundreds of people working together. A quick look was enough to understand how everything was complicated, and to what extent it lacked warmth, and an engaging atmosphere... **Erwan:** ...and to what extent everything was rigid. **Ronan:** But the world has already changed, and people, indeed, moved a lot. We imagined a huge table like something more communal: it was still the epoch where work environments were quite isolative, while we were exploring the idea of collective work — being naive enough to overlook certain things. A possibility to interact with your colleagues is an advantage, but makes it hardly possible to concentrate... So, together with Vitra, we came to the conclusion — and, I guess, we were not the only ones — that there was no universal solution. That designing an office is not about cloning one fixed situation for each of 100 employees, but about creating three-four types of situations: one collective; the second one, a bit more screened off, for meetings; and yet another one, extremely intimate, where you can withdraw, make a phone call, take your time. **Erwan:** Did you notice that when someone is calling on your cell phone you stand up and start walking about the place? Then you may sit down somewhere... In such moments people are completely unaware of their actions: they can cross the road paying no attention to a car passing by... We really wish to make an environment as basic, familiar and intuitive as possible, so that it would flash immediately, right from behind that part of your brain that is currently busy thinking. But at this point things become complicated, because there are this surcharged, high-precision functional requirements for every little detail, so each time you are obliged to resolve just about everything. The real problem is that we try to precisely define some ideal workspace, leaving absolutely no margin to the users, no way to use things the way they prefer. And then there is another big issue. Almost every standard deals with stability, and in the end this frees the user of any responsibility. But why should a desk be designed to withstand 10 persons jumping on it? They might have



erwan and ronan bouroullec, former optimists

INTERVIEW

LIT CLOS / BED + ROOM / EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2000

TOP RIGHT: JOYN OFFICE SYSTEM / MANUFACTURER: VITRA / 2002

BOTTOM LEFT: ALCOVE SOFA HIGHBACK / MANUFACTURER: VITRA / 2007

BOTTOM RIGHT: JOYN HUT / MANUFACTURER: VITRA / 2004





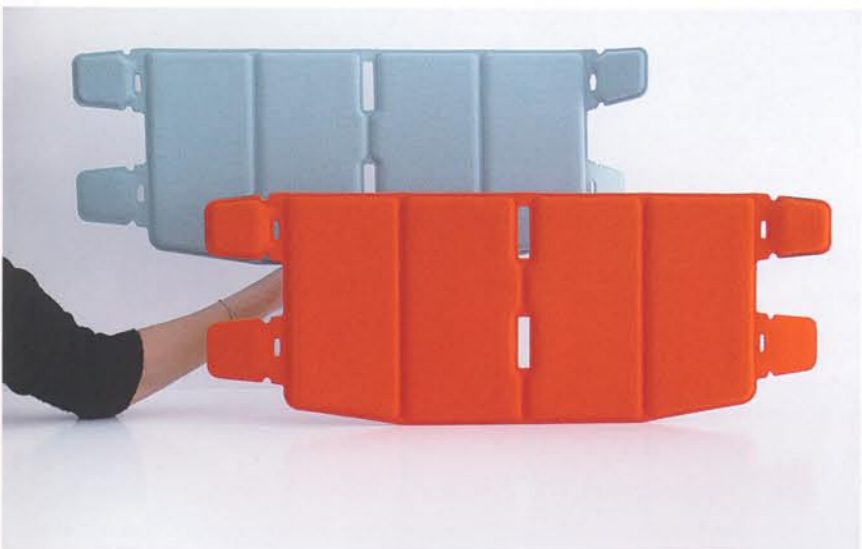
THE ALGUES
 MATERIAL: INJECTED POLYAMIDE
 MANUFACTURER: VITRA / 2004

wanted to prevent people from being injured, but why suggest that all people are stupid idiots? **Ronan:** What Erwan is talking about, is an extension of the society we live in — of this principle of total insurance, of trying to make sure that, whatever happens in your life, you will live it risk-free and without emotion. **Erwan:** For instance, if you design a wooden table, you should protect it from stains, so you apply lots of varnish, which covers the wood as if with a layer of glass. And such attitude resonates everywhere. This, too, is a disease: our environment becomes more and more polished, and less and less porous, less and less unstable.

But when you work for serial production you have to make things that would satisfy a lot of people. How do you incorporate this in your design approach? > **Erwan:** We like the reality; when we have an opportunity to work for the industry, we go for it. We try to construct the thing well, to use the materials in the right way, to have it simple, comfortable and very real. And at the same time, we always try to find something that has never been there before, to formulate things differently. **Ronan:** We can say that it starts somewhere between our personal desires and the fact that, if an object is supposed to be produced and sold in industrial quantities, it should appeal to the potential customer. But we don't normally ask ourselves whether people are going to like our design. **Erwan:** Yes, we always pose this question. We just have no means to know the answer. When some of our designs become really successful, it's often not the ones we'd have imagined. **Ronan:** If you want an example, it is surely the Algues — an object that is bizarre, challenging, and a bit on its own, but people use it a lot! Another big success was the office system Joyn. At the beginning, Vitra saw it rather as a statement: «we are doing our research, these are not even commercial products, but we continue to brainstorm.» They gave us a carte blanche, never anticipating or even imagining that it would be a success copied by everyone, as today every brand has its large office table with small partition things. But if Vitra had ever told us, well guys, now let's be serious because we have to find a universally applicable method — we would have never produced anything like Joyn. **Erwan:** Getting back to your question: of course we designed Joyn as our version of reality, but then, its every detail functioned so fluidly that people instantly wanted to use it. If the concept is strong, then the way it works becomes evident to anyone. You can give the Algues even to small kids — they will know how to assemble it.

Ronan: We make it a point that our designs and all related communication should be crystal clear. With the abundance of objects we have today, there exists a real need for clarity. If your product functions better than the others, it is essential to make it easily understandable. We believe that if a project is rich and well-thought-of, there is no need to fabricate a post factum story around it, but marketing people think differently. As soon as the project is complete, big manufacturers put to work the people who compose a story that has nothing to do with the original idea, or with what's really valuable about this product. It is based on a lie, because they think that a product should be associated with some sparkling story. But it is the essence of things that makes the reality of a project, especially today. What's really important is the starting point of an idea. We have to remind ourselves that we are dealing with a service-based discipline; that we are here to try and find solutions. Wonderful, mysterious, beautiful — but it should first of all be a service, which we seem to have forgotten lately. **Erwan:** To me, Apple's latest products are extraordinary symbols of how an object can speak for itself. When they run their iPhone or iPad ads, it's nothing more than just plainly showing how it functions, no other «story» to wrap it in. Working mainly with furniture, we've never had such opportunity. We are dealing with the functions, for which there won't be any important evolution, while they design things in progress. The ones that become the synonyms of modernity, because the functions introduced by such kind of telephone open new ways to approach your daily life. With a chair, you can't do that. **Ronan:** Our bit of luck is that we very seldom deal with big industries and advanced technologies, but rather with archaic materials and techniques. One of our first projects was about ceramics. We worked with a craftsman, and it seemed exciting to come across a technique that hasn't changed in the last thousand years — trying to produce something new and different with it, making a common and immutable material transform.

Speaking of your newly-launched bathroom collection for Axor (see p.28), you mentioned that, by the end of the third year of developing the series, you decided to abandon what you'd done up to that moment,



KVADRAT SHOWROOM / LOCATION: STOCKHOLM / 2006
 NORTH TILES / TEXTILE WALL MODULES / MANUFACTURER: KVADRAT / 2006







and restart from scratch. What happened? > **Ronan:** We have reached the end of the third year with a serious and beautiful project — too beautiful, in a sense. It had that flaw we had often noticed in the bathroom sector in the past several years: too many sharp, aggressive geometric forms. It's a sort of fashion, which, year after year, moves them away in the direction that is opposite to the very essence of the matter. A square, right-angled thing in a place, where you appear totally naked, feels dangerous. **Erwan:** What we failed to do was to achieve the flexibility of the layout. Focusing too much on the shapes, we forgot that the series was meant to be easily adaptable to any kind of bathroom space. What we've done was just a bit too chic...

The kind you are afraid to touch because you risk contaminating it with your fingerprint... You've also mentioned that, in addition to everything else, working with Axor was an occasion to make mistakes. Can you speak about your mistakes? What you have learned from them? > **Ronan:** There is maybe one design out of thirty that ends up becoming a product. We continuously make mistakes, and just sometimes — a project that appears a little less stupid than the others. A little more accurate, a little more... right. We are lucky to be working in tandem: it's a form of permanent self-criticism. Starting a project, we spend our time looking for mistakes in each other's proposals, and seeing if it's worth going ahead, and telling each other that his idea is total crap... at times it's rather frustrating. But, discussing for a whole month something that may not be particularly right, we come by this rightness in the end of the day. **Erwan:** We have this kind of exactingness that makes us do insane things — like saying, by the end of the third year, after the company has already invested enough time and money: we are sorry, but what we've done is no good. We were lucky that they said, OK, come back in six months... Today we take more and more time developing a product, making sketches, arguing, producing mock-ups to double-check things. It's our way of analyzing the project. A mock-up, and not a preliminary analysis, helps us understand where the problems lie, and what could be interesting about this project. **Ronan:** Just the opposite to Jasper Morrison who keeps deliberating, so that by the time he puts pen to paper, one sketch is enough. We draw the same thing a thousand times just to understand that it doesn't work, while he turns the idea in his head a thousand times to say in the end: that's it! **Erwan:** If we manage to develop a new, unfamiliar typology, like the Clouds we've done with Kvadrat, you look at it and understand that it's not just a moment's inspiration but something that had to be transformed. A kind of invention — not like, for instance, a chair, which is designed basing on the existing archetype. And when we take time and make mistakes, this allows us to go into some in-depth research. Sometimes design tries to follow the rhythms of fashion, giving out a new collection every six months. But then you see researches in a university, working on one project for ages and expecting to have the first results in some 20 years...

When a new client comes to your studio, what do they expect from you? > **Ronan:** I think they come because, if we do it well, they'll have something different in their product range. Which can serve them in two ways: either the product will become a good seller, or it will give them lots of good press, and therefore an added value and a certain position for the brand. **Erwan:** I think that the clients who want to identify themselves through design, like for instance Kvadrat, wanted us to ask them questions about the use of textile, and how we could transform it in a different manner. Actually, this Kvadrat story, where we've brought in all the domain of research coming from architecture, has helped them expand their field of expertise, their vision. **Ronan:** This happened partly by chance. Kvadrat asked us to design their showroom. At the time, they had a strategy of inviting designers that were well-known in the furniture sector, with an objective to become exclusive textile suppliers to renowned furniture brands. Today, in ten years' time, all the important furniture brands do work with Kvadrat. What happened was that, quite accidentally, we did a project, which proved so new in the textile domain, that it has been published everywhere, so at the end of that year Kvadrat's president thanked us for helping his brand enter the premier league... A client coming to us today comes for other reasons than those who knocked on our door ten years ago. And we refuse a lot of offers, because I am passionate about sketching, and Erwan — about making mock-ups in the basement room. So, if we take too many commissions, instead of sketching for hours I'll have to spend my days in airplanes and on client meetings. We stick to this possibility of doing few projects, choosing the best ones, and building long-term, almost conjugal relationships

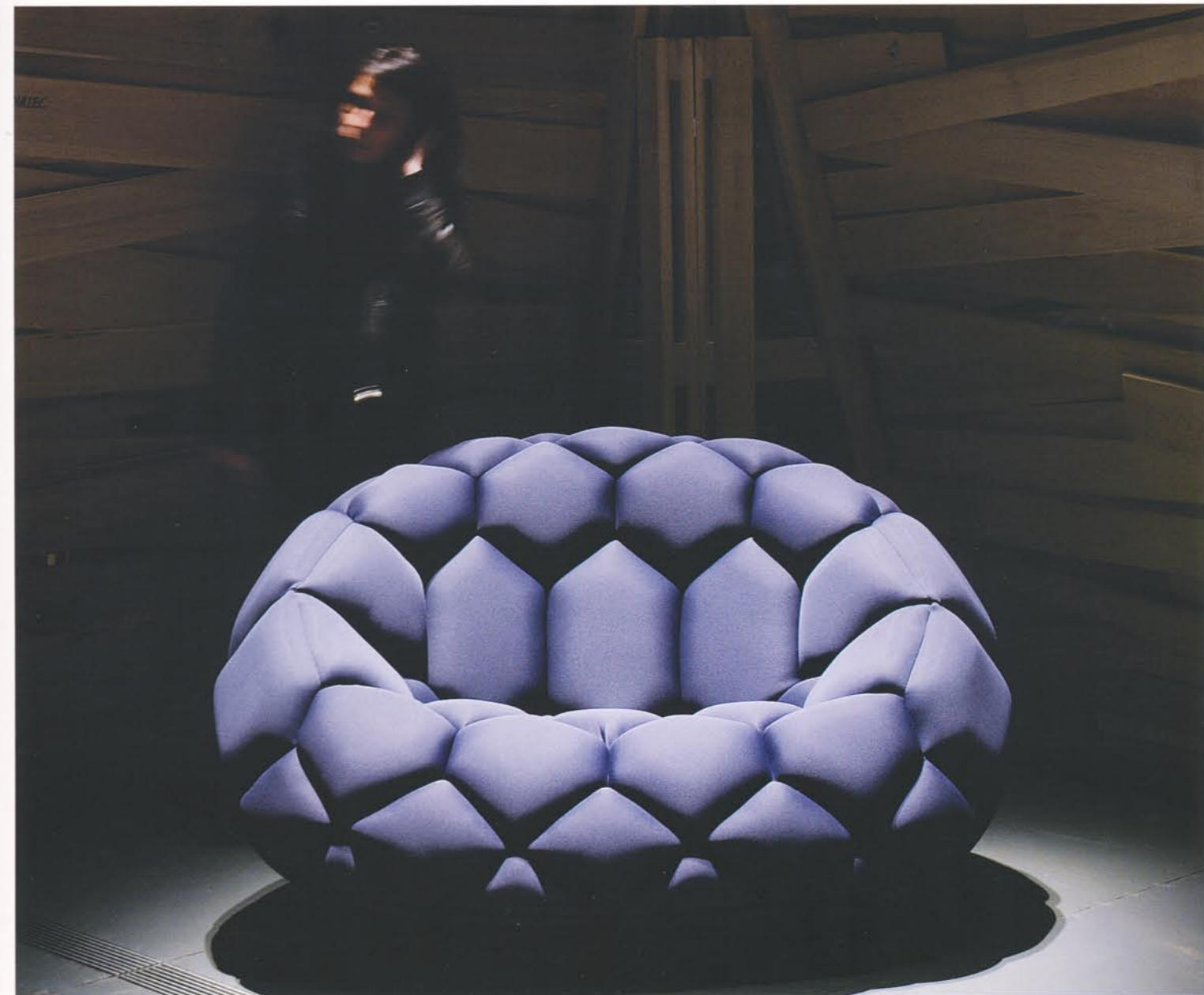
FACETT

MATERIAL: WOODEN STRUCTURE, FOAM, TEXTILE
MANUFACTURER: LIGNE ROSET / 2005



QUILT

MATERIAL: METAL STRUCTURE, FIBERGLASS SHELL, FOAM AND TEXTILE
MANUFACTURER: ESTABLISHED&SONS / 2009





BELLS
MATERIAL: LACQUERED METAL
EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2005

BELOW LEFT:
WAJIMA COLLECTION / LAMP, DESKLIGHT, TRAY SET, POCKET MIRROR
MATERIAL: LACQUERWARE, LEDs
MANUFACTURER: JAPAN BRAND / 2009

BELOW RIGHT: **ASSEMBLAGES**
EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2004



LIGHT HOUSE
MATERIAL: VENINI MURANO GLASS, MARBLE, ALUMINIUM
MANUFACTURER: ESTABLISHED&SONS / 2010

CONQUE / WIRELESS INTERCONNECTED WALL LAMPS
MATERIAL: FIBERGLASS AND PERSPEX
EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2010

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STEELWOOD CHAIR
MATERIAL: BEECH WOOD AND STEEL / MANUFACTURER: MAGIS / 2007





PARAVENT / SCREEN / MATERIAL: METALLIC STRUCTURE, FOAM AND TEXTILE / EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2008

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SOFA / MATERIAL: BLACK OAK BOX WITH WOOLEN BLANKETS INSIDE / EXHIBITION @ KREO GALLERY @ PARIS / 2008

«CAMPER TOGETHER» STORE / LOCATION: PARIS / 2009



SLOW CHAIR
 MATERIAL: KNITTED TEXTILE,
 TUBULAR STRUCTURE, CUSHIONS
 MANUFACTURER: VITRA / 2007

with the clients. That's why we take very few new clients — only when we feel that it should be an interesting thing to do, or if we have not yet had an opportunity to work in this sector.

Having seen a number of your interior designs, I get an impression that you approach spaces as if they were objects, and vice versa... When asked to design an interior, how do you proceed? > Ronan: We are often asked to design a space, and often we say «no». Personally, I understand objects fairly well; it is something I can manipulate and turn in my head, but my brain does not work in spatial terms. **Erwan:** As for me, I'd love to be an architect. **Ronan:** Recently I was in Rome and visited the MAXX museum designed by Zaha Hadid. Inside, I could hardly understand where I was. It looked like a continuous flowing corridor with no halls — and it felt crazy. It's kind of a difficult experience, but it demonstrates a truly extraordinary understanding of space and movement, an amazing capacity of connecting spaces. The interior projects we've done, usually we saw them as occasions to develop some universal objects, or rather systems that would work for this space but also for others. Often we accepted to design an interior in order to test some principles that took shape of objects. **Erwan:** In search of new definitions, contemporary architecture tends to fix the things that are in fact short-lived, and I am not sure if they will be valid or valuable in 50 years. Often a space is designed as a sign, while in my opinion it should be like an exercise book. The restaurant we did for Casa Camper in Berlin turned very difficult as a project. We did not want to make things that would not be justified by function: here's the kitchen, there's the table, and nothing else. To the owner, the place seemed cold: no colours, no vases, no special design for the menus. It looked like an empty apartment waiting for the tenant to come and fill it with his stuff. But I told him: wait, and life will put everything in its place. I often notice that contemporary architecture doesn't wait for people to arrive; it's already complete before they are here, so it's rather them who adapt to the place.

And this idea of turning textile into an architectural material, where does it come from? > Ronan: Textile in architecture is something that has been forgotten in the last 30–40 years. Le Corbusier was interested in the medieval use of carpets, when people traveled with them, because it was cold inside the castles, and putting a carpet on a wall or on the floor made the ambience warmer. We use textile exactly for the same reasons. I think, what we did in the Kvadrat showroom in Stockholm presented a form of modernity, because it was something that never existed before, but beside that, it had lots of sensuality, subtlety, and warmth — the qualities modernity is rarely associated with. **Erwan:** A textile partition is something very lightweight. A big part of our work is about making something that won't be permanent, things that have a form of versatility. Textile has this great nomadic leitmotif, that of a yurt that you roll up and take with you... I think that in the future they should really find a way to design homes with less walls. Today there may be two of us in an apartment, but tomorrow we are three or even four, and then eventually we are back to being two, and sometimes we are left alone. Making partitions is a whole story; you need to break walls, and everything is covered by dust... There should be much more flexibility. Lit Clos was the result of such considerations, and the Clouds as well — maybe it was not the best response, but I like the idea of lightweight textile walls.

What has changed in your attitude to design in these ten years? > Ronan: Everything and nothing. We started very young, and there were people like Cappellini, or some handcraft labels, who had confidence in us; who were ready to put our designs in production. These pieces were easy to produce, they required no big investments, so we did many and worked fast, and sometimes this quickness led to interesting things. Starting yet another project was easy. Today we have a totally different rhythm, we work very slowly, and it's difficult to start something new, because we have to be sure that it is going to be a lasting story. We ask ourselves if at some point this project won't become a burden because it won't be strong, intelligent, sensual or mysterious enough. To me, this entirely changes the approach, because at its base there is a totally different psychological pressure. We have become much more professional; we know more techniques, mechanisms, and systems. We know better what the problems are. Our excessive optimism is long gone. So, in the coming years we have to reinvent our work: there will be new work and a new driving force.