



# Divide and Conquer

HOW A SEAWEED-INSPIRED SCREEN BECAME A RUNAWAY HIT.

Every so often a designer comes up with something so appealing to so many people that it becomes a best seller. Jasper Morrison's pearly glass Glo-Ball light, in the shape of a beach ball, was one. Philippe Starck's Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, which looked as if it had landed from another planet, was another. Never mind that it squirted lemon juice over anyone rash enough to actually use it.

Now it's the turn of a spindly piece of plastic, 10 inches wide and a little more than 12 inches long. It resembles a twig, one sprouting lots of skinny shoots, and it's called Algae, after the French word for seaweed, because it looks like that too. Designed by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for the Swiss furniture manufacturer Vitra, the plastic pieces can be joined together to make screens or friezes. More than three million units of Algae have been sold in the five years since its debut.

Why such a hit? It's not the price. At \$35 for a pack of six, Algae isn't exactly cheap. Ronan Bouroullec, the elder of the two brothers, doesn't pretend to understand its appeal. "Algae is a mystery," he said with a laugh. "We were pleased but surprised that everyone was so enthusiastic about it when we designed it. And we are pleased but surprised that it has sold so well. But we don't know why."

Let's try. Design objects like Algae generally strike a chord if they create a look that happens to be desirable at a particular time. With Starck's lemon squeezer, it was the "I'm hip to postmodernism but insecure enough to need everyone to know it" early-1990s vibe. Almost



a decade later, Morrison's lights struck a fashionably futuristic note for all of those people who couldn't afford to hire Marc Newson to turn their lofts into space pods but could spare a few hundred bucks to treat themselves to a glowing sci-fi ball.

As for Algae, once you join the pieces together they create something that seems to float through the room like a vine or a cloud. The effect is naturalistic but also technological. The Bouroullecs set out to design a transparent screen that people could make in whatever size or shape they wished. They did so by using advanced software to produce a single piece of plastic, which could multiply indefinitely. "It was a mathematical exercise to create perfect points of connection," Ronan recalled. "It was only by chance — a lucky chance — that the result looked like seaweed."

Lucky, too, that naturalism and technology are a seductive package right now. Perhaps we're bored by slick futurism or desperate for things that seem meaningful in a scary era. Maybe it's a bit of both. But by floating Algae across our homes, we're saying, "I'm over superficial styling and into serious stuff that matters, like science and nature."

Algae also satisfies our desire to take a designer's idea and to personalize it, rather than settling for the same thing as everyone else. We're so accustomed to doing that in the digital world — to strategizing our way to victory in video games and navigating our own routes around the Internet — that we want to customize other elements of our lives. That's why we'd rather make screens ourselves by slotting bits of Algae together than have the Bouroullec brothers play old-fashioned design gods and make the creative decisions for us.

Last but not least, Algae is oddly useful. I say "oddly" because it doesn't fulfill a practical function in the traditional sense as, say, Morrison's

light does by illuminating a room or Starck's lemon squeezer by extracting some of the juice from a lemon (even if much of it ends up stinging your eyes). You can make a screen out of those plastic pieces, but they're so spindly that the result will always be too flimsy to block off one part of a room from another. Instead they suggest where such a division might be or, as Ronan Bouroullec put it, imply "a psychological separation between two spaces."

This is handier than it sounds. More and more of us are either living and working in the same space or sharing open-plan spaces with other people, and we need to use them differently at different times. Defining those spaces with something that's as versatile and as easy to put up and down as Algae is a sensible solution: so sensible that once its designers had added a timely whiff of techno-naturalism, it was bound to be a best seller. ■