



CIRCLE GAME
Left: A Botanica piece among collected objects. Below: The designers' personal living area is on the mezzanine above the studio. Right: Trimarchi with the duo's first commission from Flos lighting, the WireRing.

CHANGE AGENTS
Designers Andrea Trimarchi (left) and Simone Farresin of Formafantasma in their studio-cum-home in the northern industrial suburbs of Amsterdam.



“THEIR WORK SPURS DEBATE AND INSPIRES THE YOUNGER GENERATION.”
—BRENT DZEKCIORIUS



SWING TIME
Below: Natural light floods the studio, which has a glass roof and was once a metal factory. Bottom left: A shelf displaying samples of the duo's design work.



CREATIVE BRIEF

OBJECT LESSONS

The duo behind the studio Formafantasma generates ideas by interrogating design's role—and how it can change the world.

BY ALICE CAVANAGH PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBBIE LAWRENCE

SINCE ESTABLISHING a practice nine years ago, Italian designers Andrea Trimarchi, 34, and Simone Farresin, 37, of the Amsterdam-based studio Formafantasma, have developed a singular aesthetic—one that questions the role of design and how it can effect change in the world. “We find something problematic in our role, at least in how it has been shaped historically: Designers step in at a very specific moment in the production chain, and we are often in charge of turning a half-finished product into something desirable,” says Farresin, who has light eyes and a neatly trimmed moustache. “As a generation we are conscious of the fact that when we create something, it will have an impact. We don't have a solution, but we question all the time.”

As such, their portfolio is less a catalog of practical objects than a study of what might be. Take *Botanica*—a 2011 commission from Plart Foundation, an Italian institution devoted to researching the preservation of plastic arts—which imagined vessels created in a world without oil-based materials; or *De Natura Fossilium*, an assortment of brutalist furniture and objects crafted from volcanic lava from Mount Etna in Sicily, where Trimarchi grew up. Last year, a series of experiments in the art of lighting became Foundation, a standout installation at the Salone del Mobile fair in Milan. The sculptural designs bore a poetic, ethereal lightness but, as with everything they do, were primarily a conduit for intensive research. One piece, a study on the absence of color in the winter,

cast a rainbow of reflections on the walls through the use of layered dichroic glass.

In tandem, Formafantasma presented its first industrial design for Flos lighting, which will be available this spring in the U.S. The *WireRing*, a wall light stripped to its utilitarian core, is constructed from an electric cable and a ring-shaped LED strip—and shows how little Trimarchi and Farresin plan to adjust their approach for a wider market. (They also previewed the *Blush Lamp*, a minimal LED strip and reflective glass; production timing hasn't been confirmed.) Though spare, both designs were a challenge to engineer. “For us, it's really about designing the necessary and about creating tools,” says Trimarchi. “We tried to do something that was as minimal as possible, so it took up less space for shipping. It's as reduced as we could make it.”

“This project was based on extremely experimental studio work—not your typical commercial product from Flos,” says Brent Dzekciorius of London-based materials company Dzek, which has worked with Trimarchi and Farresin on a number of projects, including the development of volcanic-ash glazes for building materials. “That's important because there are so few opportunities to be forward-thinking in the commercial landscape.” Piero Gandini, the CEO of Flos, says of his decision to collaborate with the

duo: “The way Andrea and Simone work and live touched me—they think, imagine and interpret every moment of life following a precise aesthetic vision.”

To date, much of Trimarchi and Farresin's work has ended up in museums—the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art and the Met in New York City, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London have all acquired works. Although a recent wave of commissions (including lighting with Flos and a line of color-printed, ceramic tiles for the Italian brand Cedit) has diversified their output, mass production is the furthest thing from their minds. “If we had to do one project a year, and it was the right project, that would be enough,” Trimarchi says.

Trimarchi and Farresin, who are a couple, met during their undergraduate studies at ISIA (Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche) in Florence, after which they applied together for the master's course at the Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands. They've always been a team, even at school, so much so that when they talk about work they often finish each other's sentences. “We don't always agree on everything,” says Farresin. “If one of us is not convinced, then we know it's a bad idea,” interjects Trimarchi. Animated discourse is key to the early stages of their creative process, with immersive research taking up the lion's share of the

rest. “The design process comes at the end, and that is something that can really scare our clients because they never know what they're getting,” says Farresin.

This studios, high-minded approach is a legacy of the Design Academy, where they both now teach. Their joint graduation project—“Molding Tradition,” a collection of ceramic vases that critiqued the perceived threat of immigration on local identity—helped crystallize their way of thinking. “At the Academy, we were always asked, ‘What is the relevance for this moment in time? Who do you want to be as designers? What is your role in society?’” says Farresin.

After graduation, they opened a studio in Eindhoven and later moved to the northern industrial suburbs of Amsterdam, into a glass-roofed, open-plan space in a former metal factory that doubles as their home. Every other week, work takes them to different spots around the world. In a few days, they will fly to Melbourne to take part in the National Gallery of Victoria's contemporary art and design Triennial, which runs until mid-April. Intrigued by how design can contribute to a more efficient use of resources, the duo explored metal extraction and electrical waste in the multimedia project *Ore Streams*. “We live in a global economy, but the recycling of products is not designed with this in mind,” Farresin

says. “Developing countries have different processes in place.”

The exhibit includes two parts: eight designs resembling office furniture constructed from recycled materials and an 18-screen video installation featuring interviews conducted with academic researchers, electronics producers, NGOs and even Interpol on the subject of electronic waste. “There is not a real discussion between engineers and recyclers,” Trimarchi explains. “For us, that is a missing link.”

“Objects are how they communicate ideas, but there's so much more to what they're doing,” Dzekciorius says. “Which is why curators realize that their messages are important. The work spurs debate and inspires the younger generation to think about solutions.”

For *Ore Streams* the designers went one step further, outlining a series of strategies for industrial designers to adopt—ideas they hope will resonate well beyond the parameters of their own discipline. “There are other industries that have been more avant-garde than design: Think about the slow-food movement, which started by looking at what we eat, and then working out where produce comes from,” says Trimarchi.

“This is just a contemporary necessity,” adds Farresin. ●