

Experiments in subtlety



IMAGE: JULIAN ANDERSON

Bouroullec

Conversation between
designer **RONAN BOURULLEC**
and icon editor **JUSTIN MCGUIRK**

DISCUSSED

- why Erwan isn't here
- thinking of Vitra every day
- the €57,000 gamble
- designing without Photoshop or Illustrator
- looking for a new challenge
- getting involved in every part of the process
- how designing is like cooking and acting

RONAN BOURULLEC Erwan and I never lecture together, because we can fight or argue together in a lecture. It's quite sympathetic for the public but it's a bit embarrassing for us so that's why we don't do it anymore.

JUSTIN MCGUIRK You can spend four years developing a project – you seem to have created this enviable situation for a designer where you are able to treat your work like research, and it takes as long as it takes. This relies on a very old-fashioned idea of patronage because you have a long-standing relationship with people like Rolf Fehlbaum at Vitra – they trust you and they give you an enormous amount of freedom.

RB But this freedom starts to imprison you when you start to work for them for ten years. **Since the day Rolf entered the studio, every day of my life I have to think of Vitra.** It's a marvellous company to work for, maybe the best. But it's someone who is never satisfied, and we are more or less the same. It's a lot of tension ... so we have a lot of freedom but we pay for it.

JM Tell us about your most successful Vitra product, the Algues modular screen.

RB It was very interesting because no producer wanted it. We had the opportunity to do an exhibition with a certain amount of money, around €57,000, so we spent all the budget of

the exhibition on the injection-moulded pieces to make this very open wall. Sometimes when you present something you can see it's going to appeal, and it was the case for this project. Vitra decided to produce it and they sold 3 million pieces, which is a bit insane, a bit like pollution, but it's a fact.

JM Given how difficult it is to make a living as a designer, the fact you spent the whole budget on that piece suggests a tremendous amount of confidence in that product, because you made another similar screen and you said it was a disaster – you sold just 2,000 units. Why was one successful and the other not? And how do you have so much confidence in one to go into production yourself when no one wanted it?

RB The fact is ... to live in this world, to have a studio when you are just a designer and not doing interiors, is very complicated. But we are passionate about this work. Maybe it's a good discipline to earn a lot of money, but not in our case. We have never worked just for money. It was because we thought we had something new to discover or something to bring ... We have a studio now that is a bit more practical but for eight years we had a studio in a suburb of Paris in the most terrible zone. I remember six years ago icon did an interview and they came to the studio and they were really afraid and the opening of the piece was ...

JM It was something like you have a studio in an area of Paris that stinks of piss (icon 007) ...

RB Exactly. We are very old-fashioned in our way of working, we spend a lot of time to draw, we do a lot of mock-ups. For example, Jasper [Morrison], who is a good friend, does not do mock ups any more. I think it's right – the fact is that we are designers who are not able to use Photoshop or Illustrator.

JM Can you talk a little about drawing? Some of yours are very abstract, just rhomboids. But you can see the relationship between the drawing and the finished piece even if it's only tangential. There is a definite aesthetic.

RB I don't think I know how to speak about our way of working. Our process is very intuitive. I don't know ... maybe tomorrow I will spend my day drawing or sewing. Basically our day is organised around a very efficient team who are like a firewall to protect us. It's very rare that we are in meetings. We go more or less once every two weeks to Vitra to see the prototypes and from Italy we receive prototypes in the studio via DHL. So we speak a lot on the phone to discuss ideas, but we don't really meet new clients because we don't need more. We know them well. And so, we spend a lot of time drawing. We are very craft-oriented, and we are very skilled in 3D modelling. We have good

Clockwise from this picture Ronan Bouroullec; a component of the Algues screen, Vitra, 2004; the Vegetal chair, Vitra, 2009; sketchbook drawing

IMAGE: JULIAN ANDERSON



assistants for that so it's more or less a way of working. So drawing is a part of the day. We draw just to practise, and so it's not just doing a chair but it could be a tree, a house. So we lose a lot of time but it's a part of our work.

JM Having "enough" clients is an astute attitude because it creates desire. I have the impression - it may be wrong - that there are manufacturers out there who say, "We'd love to have something by the Bouroullecs", but you don't need it. Whereas a lot of designers are putting themselves out there and trying to get manufactures all the time. It's funny how once you reach a certain level saying "no" is an aphrodisiac.

RB The problem now is that for lots of companies we are enjoying the situation of an old couple. I mean, you work for them for ten years. We love to be very ... to invent and not to ... So we are now in a critical situation where we have success; we can present anything and everyone will say it's interesting ... we need to find a new challenge.

JM Your process shots are always beautiful. It often seems that it's almost as important to document all the stages of a project as it is to produce a final object. You can make a book on every one of your pieces - it's almost like that's the work sometimes.

RB There is a tension about the process. What is interesting is the process, and that we like to do everything by ourselves - all the pictures. And in Vitra we are lucky because the position of the designer is very important so you can decide and discuss everything: the advertising, everything. We like to be involved in all these questions.

JM Your work seems to be in a grey area. What it does is break down barriers between different conceptions of pieces of furniture. So it's not just a chair but a multifunctional room divider. It's like these things are very difficult to pin down, and they seem to cater to a society that is very nomadic and in shift, and it's all about flexi-time and hot-desking. You know, not sitting in the same place all day, very mobile - it's very modern in that sense.

RB Thank you. Actually, two weeks ago Egon Bräuning, who was the head of development at Vitra, died. He was 67 and he worked with the Eameses, he developed the Panton chair. He was an extremely difficult guy because when you showed him a drawing he would say it wasn't possible. A lot of designers had problems to work with him. For us it was different - when we started I was 25 so when he said that it was not possible we trusted him. And he said our Vegetal chair was the most complicated chair he ever had to work with. He didn't mean it was a good chair but it was complicated. †

QUESTION

PETER MARIGOLD You said you are an industrial designer and that you use the gallery as a sketchbook. When you are working with a gallery do you imagine an industrial product or do you make things that can only exist in a gallery context?

RB We have an agreement with the owner of Kreo that if a project that we've done with them could reach an industrial situation it could be done. In the beginning we thought it could be an experiment for industry but maybe it's not so direct. To achieve good industrial product is like cooking. When you are cooking you can have the best vegetables, cook it perfectly but if there is too much salt at the end it will be a nightmare. For an object it's the same. It could be a good shape, and it could be comfortable but if the price is two times that of a plastic chair it will be ... it's not a good answer. So the gallery is a way for us to reach a certain type of quality [rather than] a certain volume. I think a good designer is like an actor ... Scorsese and I don't know ... you have to be dramatic one day and smile the other. A good actor can be good in all contexts. A bad actor is someone who is always doing the same role. The most interesting ones are the ones that are more intelligent in different contexts.