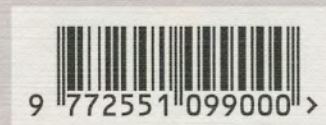


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INTERVIEW

Johanna Seban



Julien Dossena and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec work in different design fields – the former in fashion, the latter in product and furniture – but they have tread similar paths. Meeting for the first time, they discuss their creative processes, and their need to remain tactile in an increasingly digital world.

Julien Dossena meets Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec

JOHANNA SEBAN This is the first time you have met. Do you know each other's work?

JULIEN DOSSENA I discovered the Bouroullecs just after high school, in 2001, when I went to Rennes to study art history. I immediately liked their work. I was undoubtedly attracted by their Breton side, which I share.

RONAN BOURULLEC I don't know much about fashion culture, but I knew a little about the house of Paco Rabanne. At the beginning of our careers, when we were struggling to survive, we designed perfume bottles to make some money. We did five or six projects for Paco Rabanne, but none were accepted. More recently, I have encountered Julien's name, image, and some of his work.

ERWAN BOURULLEC I have never been too aware of other people's projects. I am really focused on what I am doing and don't pay much

attention to what is happening around me. And I am far from being an expert on fashion. I wear the same clothes all the time. I buy four of each and wear the same thing. I hate shopping.

JS You all grew up in southern Finistère in Brittany, far from the design and fashion worlds you belong to today. How did you get where you are now?

JD Originally, I wanted to study art history and went to college in Rennes. I have been drawing since I was a child and thought that theory would be enough for me, but I missed drawing right away. I switched to applied arts at the École Duperré, which I liked less. In the end, I went to La Cambre, an art and design school in Brussels.

EB I was born in 1971. It was another era. Without digital technologies, we had much less access to images. My parents were not espe-

“When I get up in the morning and have a smoke at the window, questions immediately start popping up.”

Erwan Bouroullec

cially into art or applied arts but, strangely, they enrolled me at the École des Beaux-Arts, then sent Erwan there. From a young age, I went there every Wednesday. Drawing soon became very important to me. We lived in the country, a very isolated, lonely place. Drawing helped me to fill a void. I was very bad at school. I was bored to death. Luckily, I got into an applied arts school. I had the impression that my career was starting there. Later, I returned to the decorative arts school. I didn't really go, but it reassured my parents.

JS What professions did you imagine for yourselves?

JB I knew it would be related to design. My grandfather was a sculptor and, as a teenager, I was wary of the profession of artist. I think I was afraid. So, I thought that applying art to product or object design could be a good way to go. Then I discovered *The Face* and Italian *Vogue*, and the fashion images fed my imagination. I wanted to work in design and was naturally drawn to fashion.

JB At 15, I was doing photography and making posters and designing furniture. But in Quimper, in a rather good library, the only book on design was an introductory book, *Que Sais-Je?* I was attracted to design because I liked the idea of building things that last over time. And it's quite rewarding as a profession: You design a chair and later see it in cafés in Tokyo. I didn't choose this kind of work; it came naturally to me. Applied arts is a subject that's easier to explain. It's a leap into the void that is less frightening than the visual arts. Even though in France, the profession of 'designer' doesn't exist administratively. A designer is a pseudo-artist who designs chairs.

“There is an analogy between film credits and what we do. Our projects are the result of collective intelligence.”

Ronan Bouroullec

JS How do you create designs that will contribute to people's daily lives?

JB I often ask myself this question, especially right now, since I am designing only womenswear for Paco Rabanne. I think I look for a balance between personal satisfaction on the level of aesthetics or formal expression, and functionality. I try, at the same time, to touch the personal and to think of a garment as a tool to help a woman adapt to modern life. I realize, more and more, that the functionality of a piece nourishes formal research.

JB One of the most important experiences in our career was a meeting with Rolf Fehlbaum at Vitra, who offered us very serious projects at a time when we had little experience. Among the topics we worked on was the issue of workspaces. Laptops were showing up everywhere and changing the way people worked. At first, I thought we were a casting error. I had never worked for anyone else, and Erwan had only worked for me. Finally, I realized that he was fishing for new solutions in our naivety. So yes, of course, I think of the user, whether it's a friend, my parents, a Japanese person, or a very tall Dutchman. But it must remain rather vague. You have to keep your intuitive confidence.

JB When I get up in the morning and have a smoke at the window, questions immediately start popping up: How to find a solution for a certain project, how to succeed with contemporary methods... All that obsesses me. Design and fashion are very present in our daily lives. Unfortunately, there is little interest in it, and not much is provided in the way of means to develop major projects.

JB At one time, everything I did – going to an exhibition, reading a book, seeing a movie

– had to have a reason, a meaning. It had to nourish my work. I have learned to let go a little. It was getting too forced; there was no longer any real research.

JS Ronan and Erwan, you are known for the flexible, adjustable office furniture you designed for Vitra, which allows movement in the workplace. Julien, your work also favors movement through the fluidity of the garments. In what way is movement at the heart of your work?

JB A body is in movement, so clothing must move. At Paco Rabanne, there is, of course, a history of heavy garments, yet all those articulated pieces create another type of movement. Chain mail is like liquid metal on the body.

JB We live in a world so complicated that if we have to struggle with non-portable furniture or tight clothing, it becomes complicated. But there is a time for everything, and there is surely a time for high heels. Still, every time I create an object, I wonder if Jacques Tati would mock it because it lacks humanity or charm.

JS Our world is becoming more digital and virtual, so what does it mean to practice a profession that consists of creating an object and working with your hands?

JB I can't imagine my work if I didn't create the object with my hands. Designing and drawing are important, but you also have to work on the prototype, correct it, take it somewhere else, pin it. This is the part of my work I am most in tune with, when I try to correct the lines or accentuate or minimize an effect. It is only through my hands that I can really look for the intention of a skirt. We can often see whether or not a garment has been touched by human hands.

JB The advantage of being an old designer is

that I can now mentally visualize something without drawing it, as if I had software in my head. But I work a lot on models. I have a huge budget for modeling clay. And a sewing machine. I love to receive prototypes, correct them, redo them, and to go to the factory or workshop to watch them work. Erwan is very good at models.

JS Speaking of Erwan, how do you two work as a team? And Julien, is it sometimes difficult to work on your own?

JB I started out working alone. I had some success and needed help but didn't have any money. So, as we do in rural areas, I asked my brother to help me. We are like an old couple after working together for 20 years. For a long time, we worked at the same table and traveled together. Now we have a wide variety of projects, and we work differently. Erwan is very interested in electronics and coding, which he is learning. He can tackle anything and spend a month very focused on a subject, his eyes glued to his computer. We practically have to feed him by transfusion.

JB In design, everything must be useful, solid, usable anywhere in the world at any time. We have to be rigorous, and we impose that discipline on the people we work with.

JB I was fortunate to be able to build a team that knows me by heart and can react intuitively to everything I design. As projects pile up, it's important to have people who have the same viewpoint, which allows me to delegate.

JB There is an analogy between film credits and what we do. Our projects are the result of collective intelligence. Certainly, we have an intuition and a vision, but it is transformed by the good work of the team supporting us.

This conversation has been translated from French.

