

What would be the essence of design for you?

RV “We don’t design shapes. When we make something, we don’t take a sketch as our point of departure – rather, we work from a specific concept or manufacturing process. Or we test a particular material, and this test develops into a scale model. Design is a process of organic growth.”

TR “With the world as our toolkit.”



This toolkit is filled with materials, techniques and ideas. How do you know which ‘tool’ to use?

TR “This tends to be an intuitive decision. For example, the semi-circular frame of the Bamboo Chair developed from our bending strips of bamboo. We didn’t decide beforehand to produce a legless chair.”



RV “In the case of spatial assignments, these choices can also depend on the genius loci – a location’s specific characteristics. A cold and functional hospital has a lack of warmth and intimacy.



Accidental Carpet

That is why we decided on old blankets for a work commissioned by a hospital. By stitching the blankets together, you can create a layered rug.”



What would you call the foundations of your collaboration?



TR “We both believe that the story that we’re telling is more important than the finished product.”

Accidental Carpet, Tube Table, Foam Chest, Foam Chair 01, Concrete Bench 01



RV “And we both feel a need to keep the design sober.”



TR “We basically think the same way about how to interact with the world around us.”



And in which ways do you differ from each other?



Bamboo Chair

RV “I tend to be more systematic. If we’ve decided on a specific material or manufacturing method at the start of the design process, I usually stick to this decision – so that we can preserve the purity of the design. Tejo is more pragmatic.”

Ragchair



Is this also the underlying idea for the Ragchair?



TR “That idea mainly developed after thinking about Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. He needed to design his surroundings with whatever materials he had at hand.



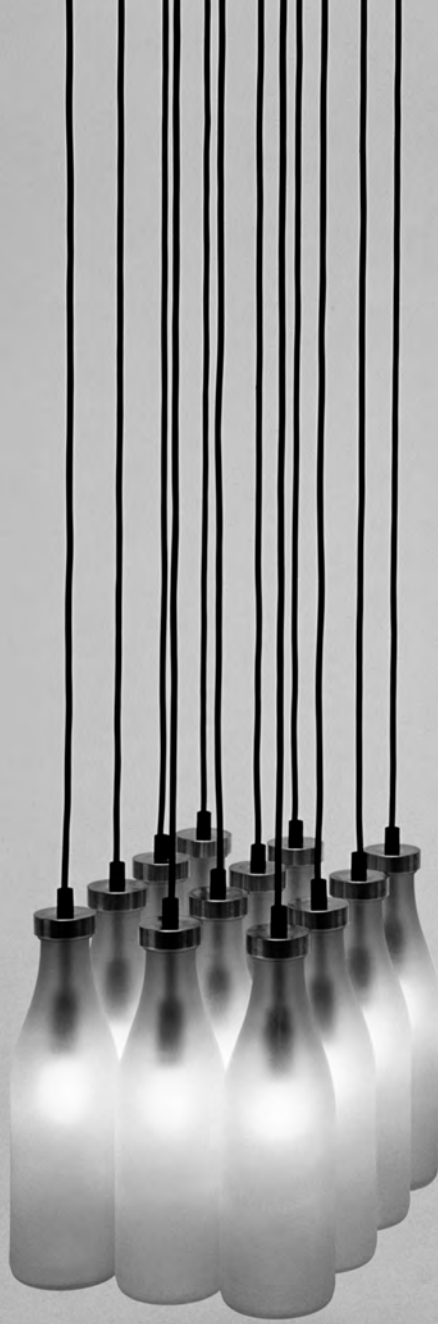
During my graduation year, I translated this idea into a home that had to be furnished with whatever materials could already be found there. This eventually resulted in my first three designs: the Ragchair, the Chest of Drawers and the Milkbottle Lamp.



Another thing that played a part was that I grew up on a farm. We had an attic that we called the ‘zutzolder’ – where you could find all the ‘zut’, the jumble.



Things are always breaking down on a farm. And then you needed to repair it on the spot with stuff from the attic.



Milkbottle Lamp

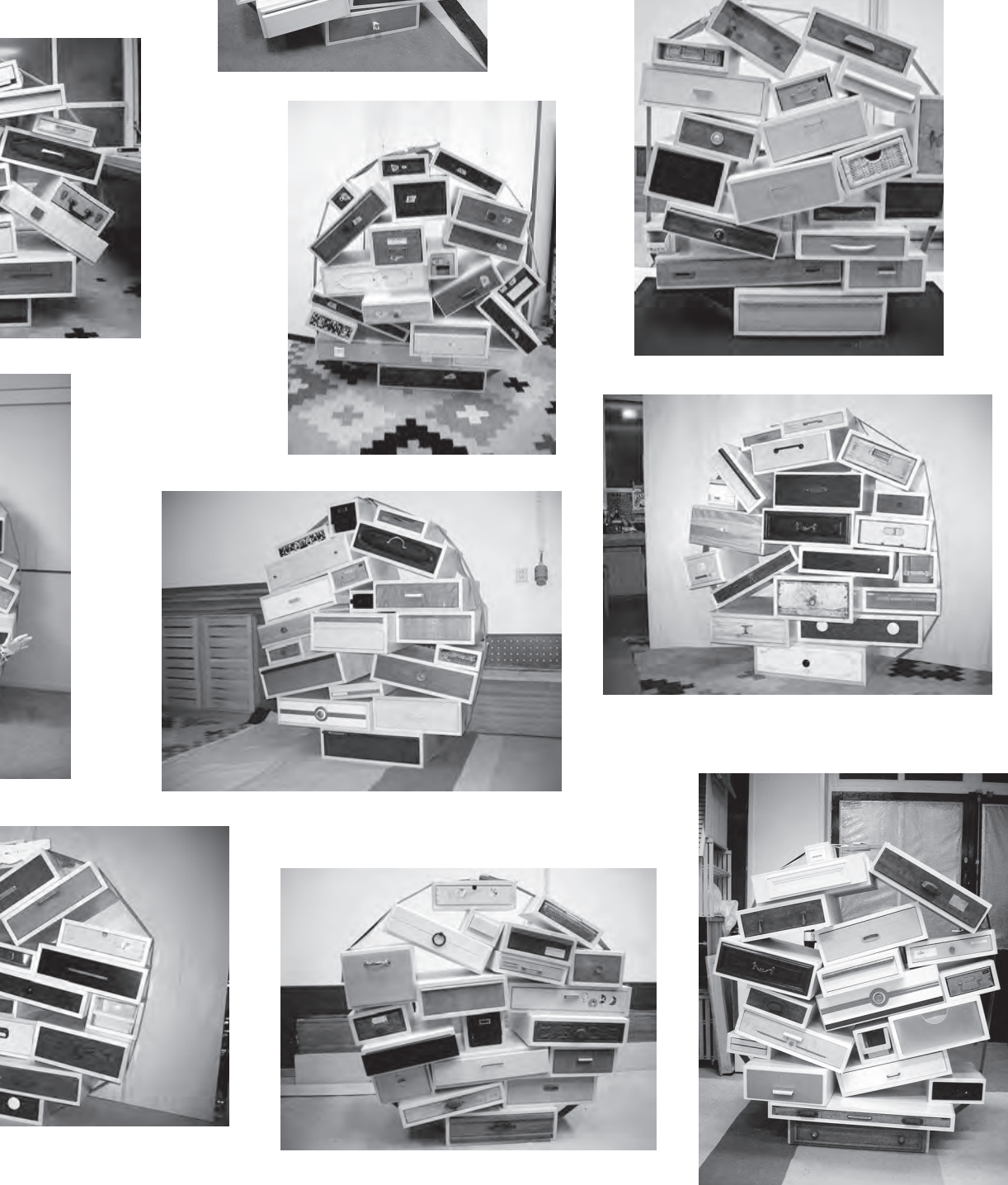
This 'making do' with whatever's at hand is literally how my fourth graduation project – the Milkbottle Lamp – came about.



In the case of the Chest of Drawers, the memories contained in the materials seem to contribute meaning in a very literal sense.



TR “This design was based on Simonides’s ideas about memory. It involves creating room for memories at various locations throughout your home. Nowadays, this could include your kitchen cabinet or the toilet in other words. This allows you to train your mind – by walking through your memory as if it were a building.



The Chest of Drawers is made up of mnemonic locations like that. You can put your holiday snaps in a romantic decorated drawer. Or you can put your mortgage papers in this unsightly little metal cabinet. Or the other way round, if you prefer. That's the game you can play with this design. Indeed, the full title for this work is actually *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory.*"



Chest of Drawers ('You can't lay down your memory')

So the drawers aren't memories in their own right?

Chest of Drawers (You can't lay down your memory')



TR “Occasionally they are. In the case of a project for Atlanta’s High Museum, we asked local residents whether they could supply their own drawer together with a personal story. We turned the drawers that came with the best stories into a new chest. Hearing these stories, it was a bit like being at an AA meeting, incidentally. They were very emotional. In a sense, you could call that chest Atlanta’s ‘collective memory.’”



RV “You see the same thing happening with the Ragchair, by the way. A lady will ask us to make a chair from the clothes of her husband who passed away.”



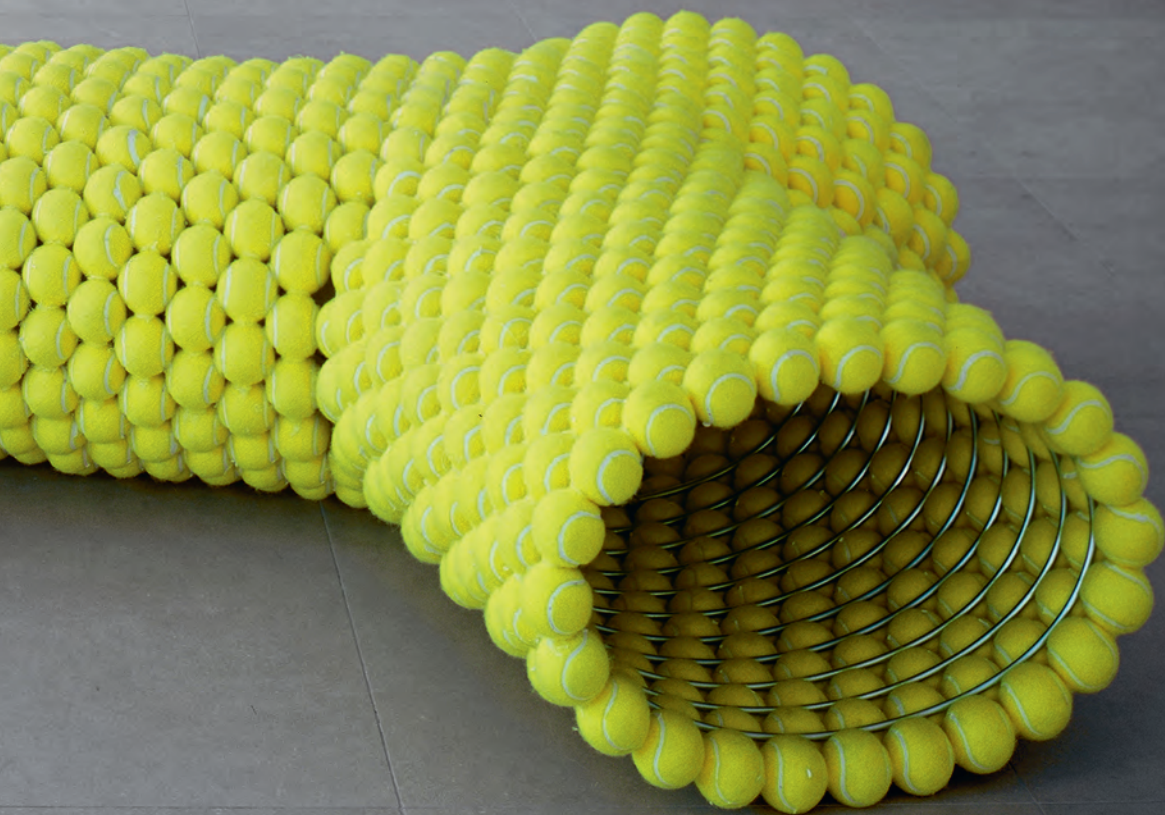
When it comes to deeper layers of meaning, doesn't a tennis ball compare somewhat unfavourably to materials like that?



RV “In that case, it’s about alienation. Huh, a bench made from tennis balls?”



But tennis balls actually have a resilient structure and a soft surface – making them an excellent choice of material for a seating unit.



Tennis Ball Bench

We wouldn't have been able to make that piece with ping pong balls. Even though the bench itself has nothing to do with tennis.”



The question remains, though: why would you make a bench from tennis balls?



Tennis Ball Bench

RV “Museum Boijmans van Beuningen asked us to make an object that visitors can sit on when they’re browsing the works in the museum depot on monitors. We treated the Boijmans collection as a living, growing organism. They’re constantly adding new items. That’s why the benches’ structure also had to represent growth. We drew inspiration from an African succulent.



How important is this symbolism?



Heaven

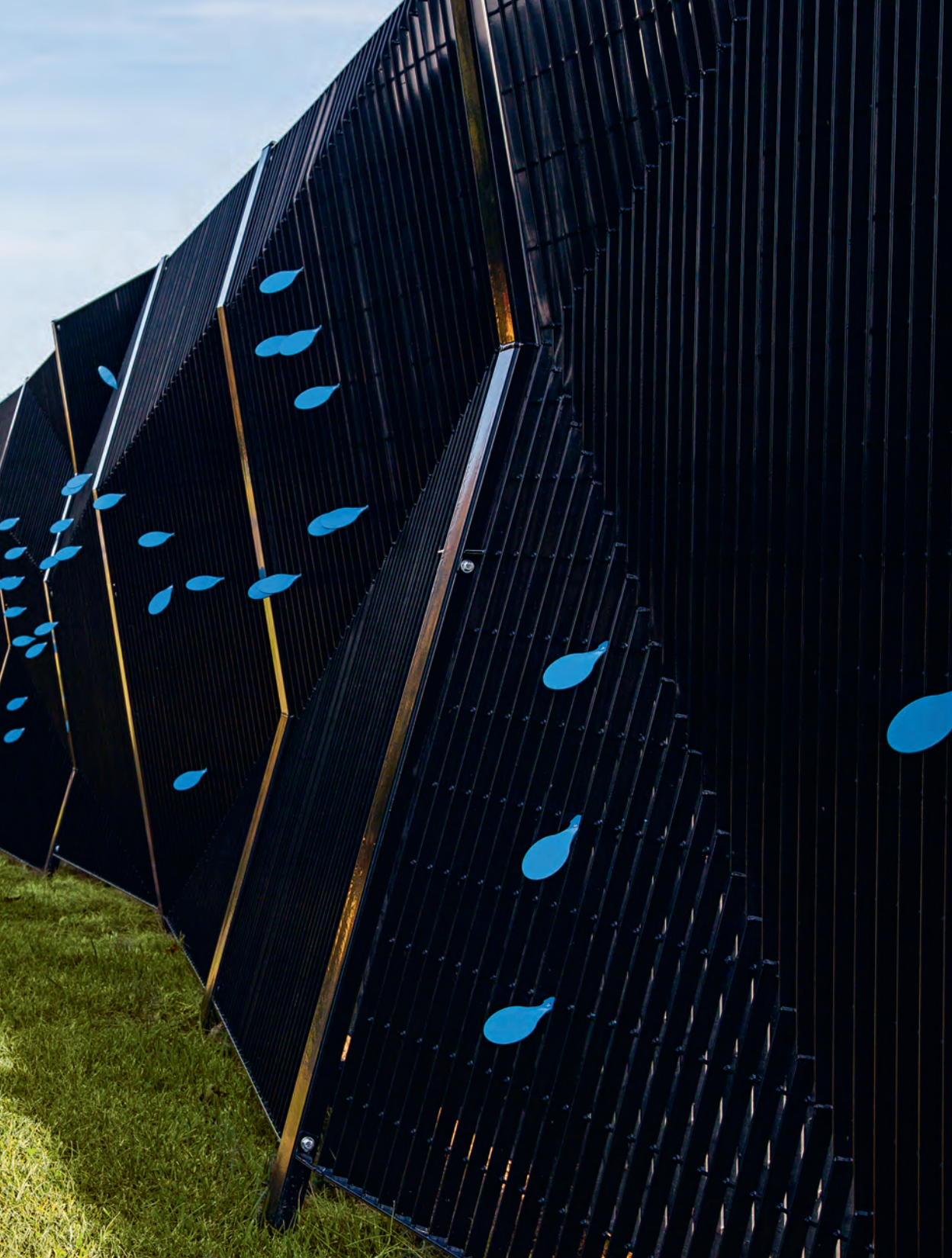
TR “It’s not enough for a design to merely serve a practical purpose.



In Arlington, a suburb of Washington DC, we designed a fence for a wastewater treatment plant. This industrial plant was erected in the middle of a residential neighbourhood. The county wanted to redevelop the plant site, so that it would fit in better.



Our fence features a pattern that constantly changes as you cycle past. And we've attached all sorts of elements from the plant to the fence as colourful elements. A handwheel, a pump, sewer pipes – you name it.



This wasn't the first time you designed a fence?

Tejo Remy & Rene Veenhuizen

THE WORLD = OUR TOOLKIT

Interview by Jeroen Junte

Essay by Ida van Zijl

The international breakthrough of a new generation of Dutch designers – presented under the sobriquet ‘Droog Design’ by Renny Ramakers and Gijs Bakker at Milan’s 1993 Salone Internazionale del Mobile – came like a bolt out of the blue. It even took insiders by surprise. Bakker and Ramakers hoped to draw attention to developments in Dutch design that they believed were worth our while. If it didn’t work out, the initiative was sure to die an early death.

But as it turned out, Ramakers and Bakker were on to something. Over the next few years, designers like Hella Jongerius, Marcel Wanders and Richard Hutten – all of whom were included in this first presentation – joined the cream of the international design world. They became figureheads of what would soon be promoted around the world under the label ‘Dutch Design’. Another designer who featured prominently in the Milan presentation was Tejo Remy, with his Chest of Drawers, Ragchair and Milkbottle Lamp.

Arriving at a satisfactory definition of what this new phenomenon was actually about proved less easy. To this day, design critics and historians struggle with determining what studios as disparate as Studio Makkink & Bey, Studio Job and Remy & Veenhuizen have in common and what distinguishes Dutch Design. Terms like ‘conceptual’ and ‘humorous’ are often bandied about without further explanation, and discussions have yet to yield a convincing explanation for its overnight success. References to the Dutch people’s heroic past and independent spirit are a bit glib: they can sooner be traced back to propagandistic government interference with the industry than solid historical research.¹ The seeds of this development can probably be found in the highly fortunate institutional

incorporation of various material and immaterial factors within the Netherlands' design education system.

In the 1980s, post-modernist design – with the Italian Memphis Group as its foremost exponent – paved the way for a new formal language. In the Netherlands, you could also find designers working in or continuing from the Memphis style, although the clean, minimalist precepts of modernism remained the dominant aesthetic. At the same time, there was a broader divide, one that would ultimately impact developments in a far more fundamental way. On one side of this divide, you could find designers who saw themselves as a link in an efficient process running from a clear-cut design problem set out in a programme of requirements to an optimum resolution as acknowledged by a variety of experts. On the other side, you could find a movement that assigned the designer a steering and directing role in this process – a role that could be so prominent that the problem in question wasn't formulated by society at large, but by the designer himself. This difference in attitudes exists separately from whatever formal language is adopted: as early as 1953, the undisputed modernist Gerrit Rietveld told his students that the designer's role is to direct the industrial process.² Although this fundamental position can be applied to any production process, in practice the divide ran between industrial designers on the one hand, and designers who manufactured their own products on the other: put simply, between Delft University of Technology and the art schools; between – to give both camps a face – jewellery and product designer Gijs Bakker and graphic designer Wim Crouwel. The former was responsible for organising the 1980 travelling exhibition 'Design aus den Niederlanden/ Design from the Netherlands'³ ; the latter for the 1982 exhibition 'Ontwerpen voor de Industrie'⁴ at Maastricht's Bonnefantenmuseum, which presented products that embodied this industrial vision.

Social Fence, 2007

A playground fence transformed into a meeting area.

Commissioned by the Municipality of Dordrecht / Produced by Fence Design / 1,500 x 200 x 300 cm / Powder-coated steel, tech-wood

Tennis Ball Bench, 2003

The object is approached as an organic, growing structure, with the tennis balls serving as a kind of cells. Made for the digital depot of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

Commissioned by Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam / In collaboration with Kossmann.dejong, exhibition architects / Various dimensions / Basic module: 130 x 130 x 45 cm / Tennis balls, glue, spring steel

Tube Table, 2012

Area where children can make objects and drawings. Realised for the 'House of Miffy' exhibition.

Commissioned by Centraal Museum Utrecht / 250 x 120 x 750 cm / Vacuum-glued cardboard tubes and plywood

Zandfortbak, 2014

Commissioned design for a school meeting point and sandbox in Breda. The design is based on the outline of the town wall as shown on old pictures of the city. The rubber playground surface has been integrated in the design.

Commissioned by the Municipality of Breda / 650 x 500 x 300 cm / HDPE filled with gravel

Colophon

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Interview: Jeroen Junte, design journalist
Essay: Ida van Zijl, art historian
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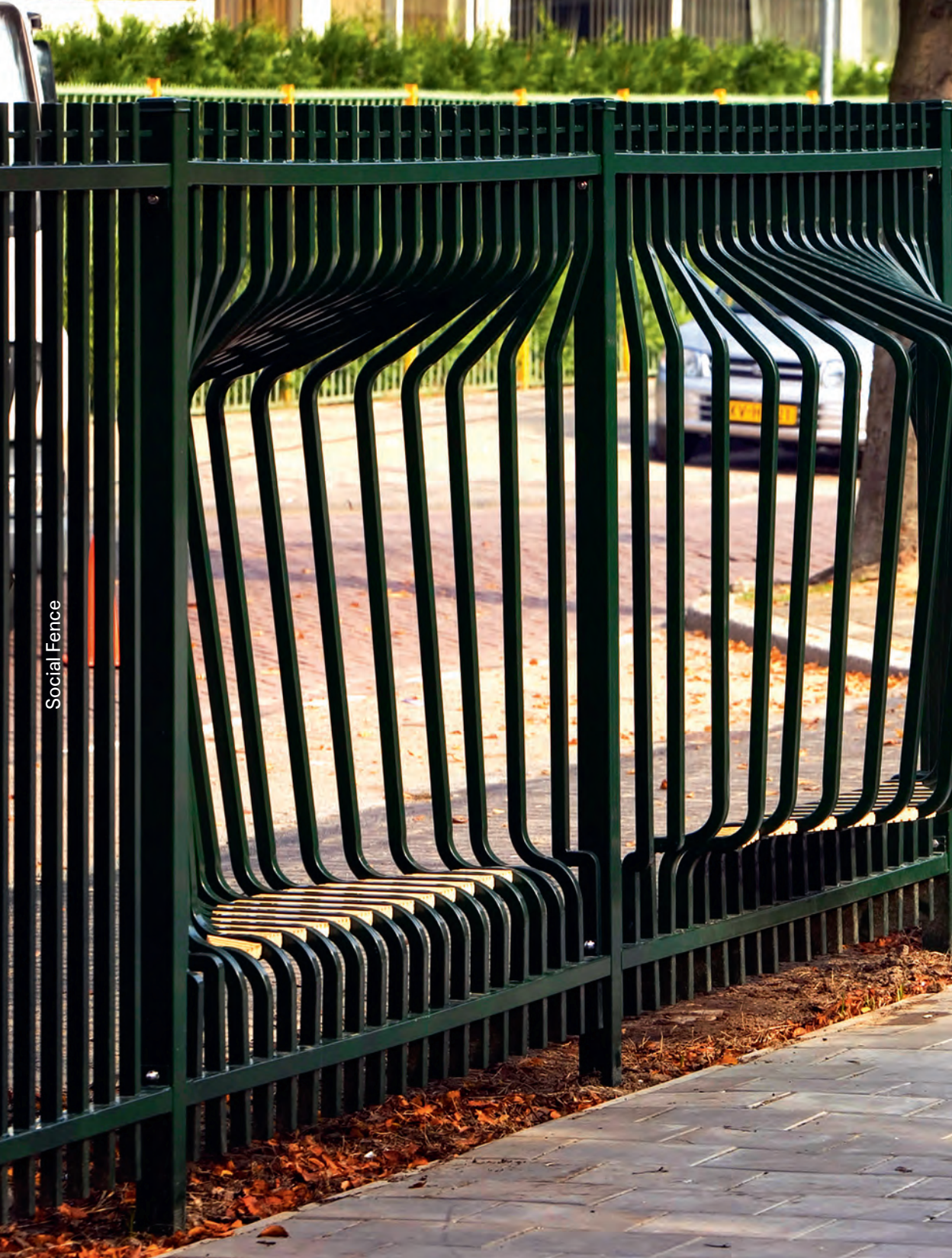
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RV “We also designed a fence with seating areas for a schoolyard in Dordrecht: the Social Fence.



Social Fence

Usually, a fence forms an obstacle for human interaction.



In this case, we turned it into a meeting place: come on – sit down and join us! What also interested us in this project was the idea of not adding something new, but changing something that already exists.”



TR “We don’t design products – we create opportunities. In this sense, you could say our designs are never finished.



That's why we enjoy working in the public space. You can create encounters in environments like that."



TR “On top of this, it was easy to make a model of this specific design. The thing was: we don’t speak Italian, but we wanted to explain to these set designers what we had in mind.”



RV “But occasionally, the design is simply that: a piece of furniture. If you go to the company restaurant of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, you’ll find a dinner table with a huge scroll there that divides the space into a dining area, a leisure area and a meeting area. Nevertheless: first and foremost, it’s a place where you sit down to eat.”

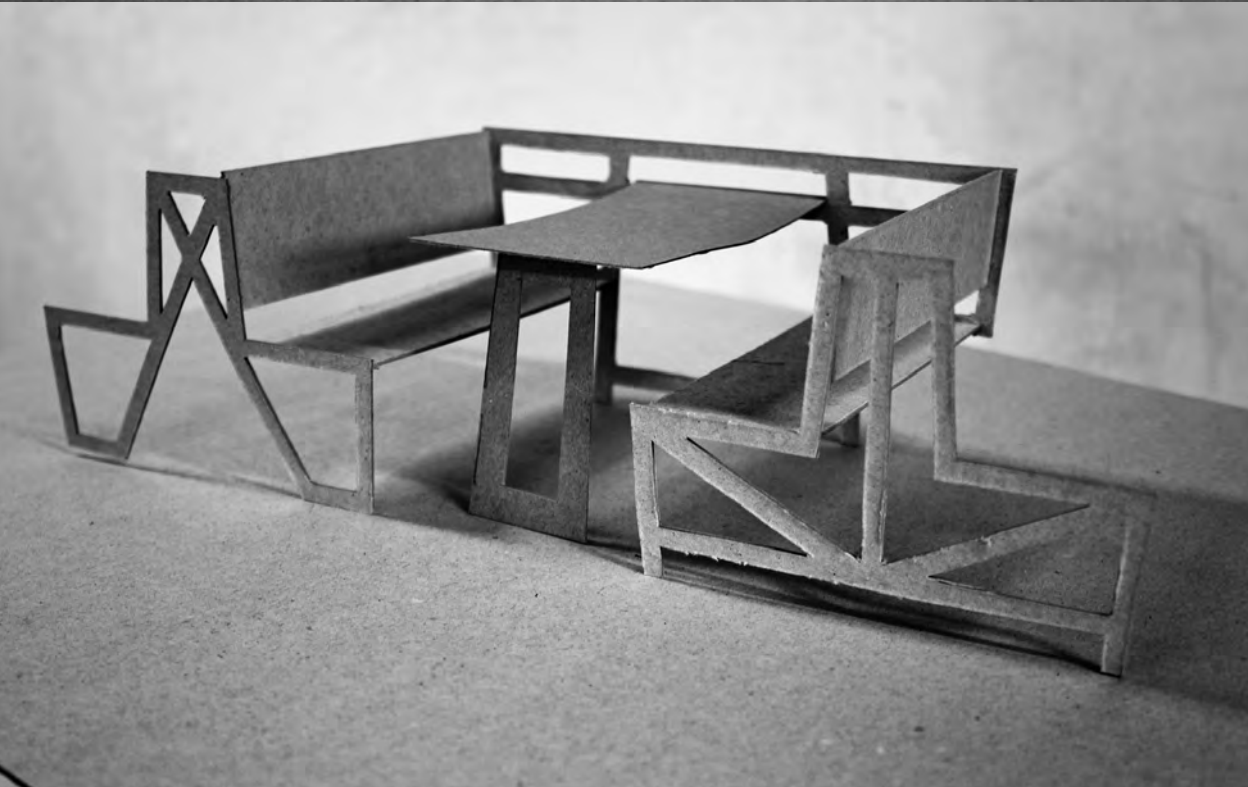


You like to work for art institutions – the Tennis Ball Bench for the Boijmans, for example, or your Nijntjehuis designs for Centraal Museum in Utrecht. Why?



House of Miffy

TR “Clients like that appreciate what you’re doing. You get more leeway. You can play around with ideas.”



Schools are another sector that often commissions your work. Is that because you look at the world with the same sense of wonder as children?



RV “We make accessible work that people feel free to engage with. Our stuff is playful and excites the imagination, and kids tend to be more receptive to that kind of thing.”



TR “It’s not as if everything’s set in stone. By putting people on the wrong foot to a certain extent, you can actually pique their interest. It’s only when people use these designs – sit on them or start to play with them – that they really discover which impact they actually have on that specific location.”



Picture Point

The key purpose of your designs seems to be creating freedom for people to make their own interpretation?



RV “I’d prefer to work towards a process whereby a design can be taken into serial production, with each individual product nevertheless being unique.”



Concrete Chair

A lot of your designs embody a paradox. You use tennis balls to make a museum bench. A collage of recycled glass objects is transformed into a showpiece. A chair that appears to be made from lightweight, resilient plastic is actually made from heavy, rock-hard concrete.



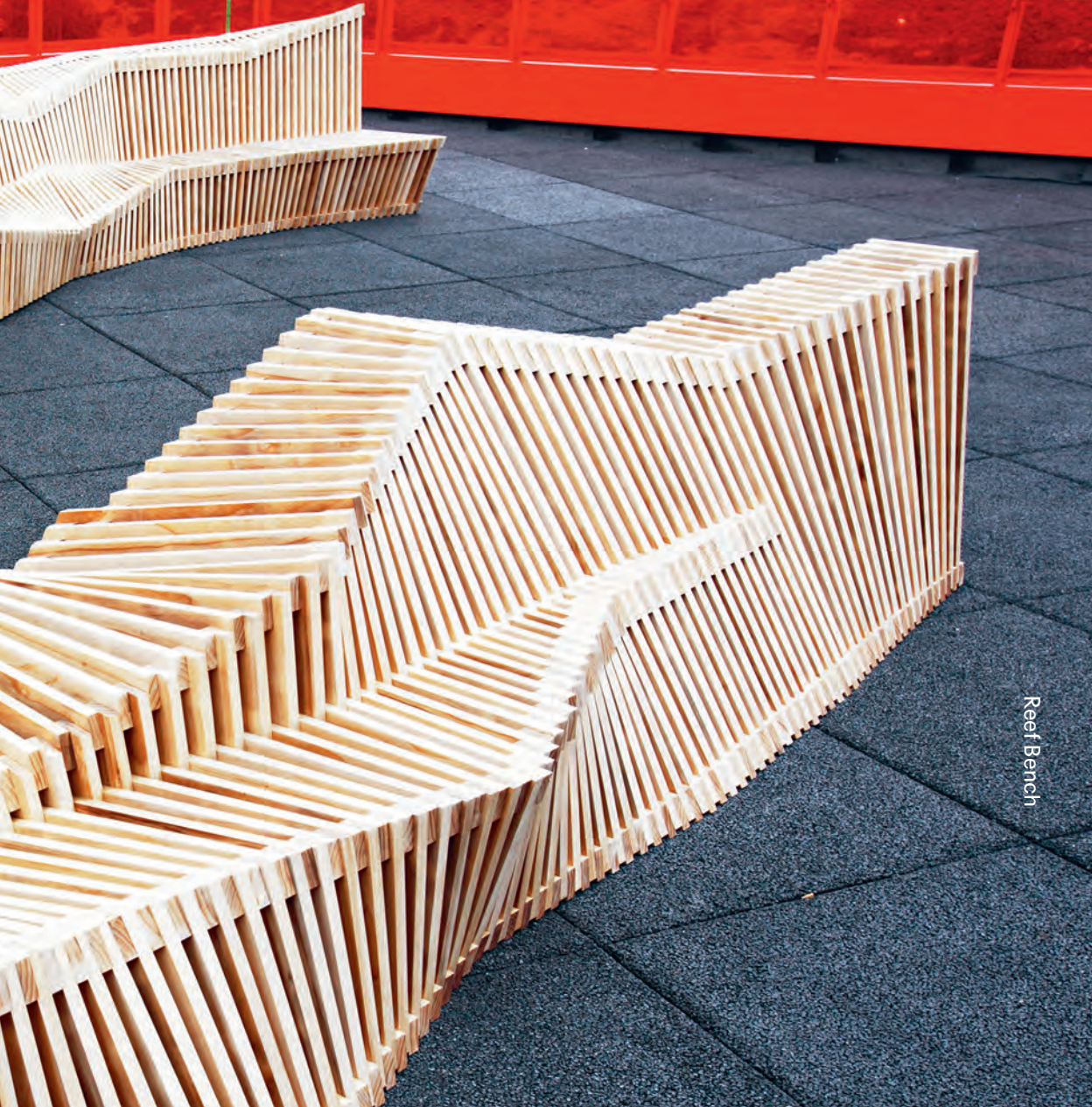
RV “This is where we end up in our own voyage of exploration. There are no givens in our approach. Why wouldn’t you make a chair out of concrete? The concrete chairs originally started as a study for a bench that we hoped to cast.



We had dug a mould for it in the ground. We had come up with this bench for a project in the public space in Leiden.

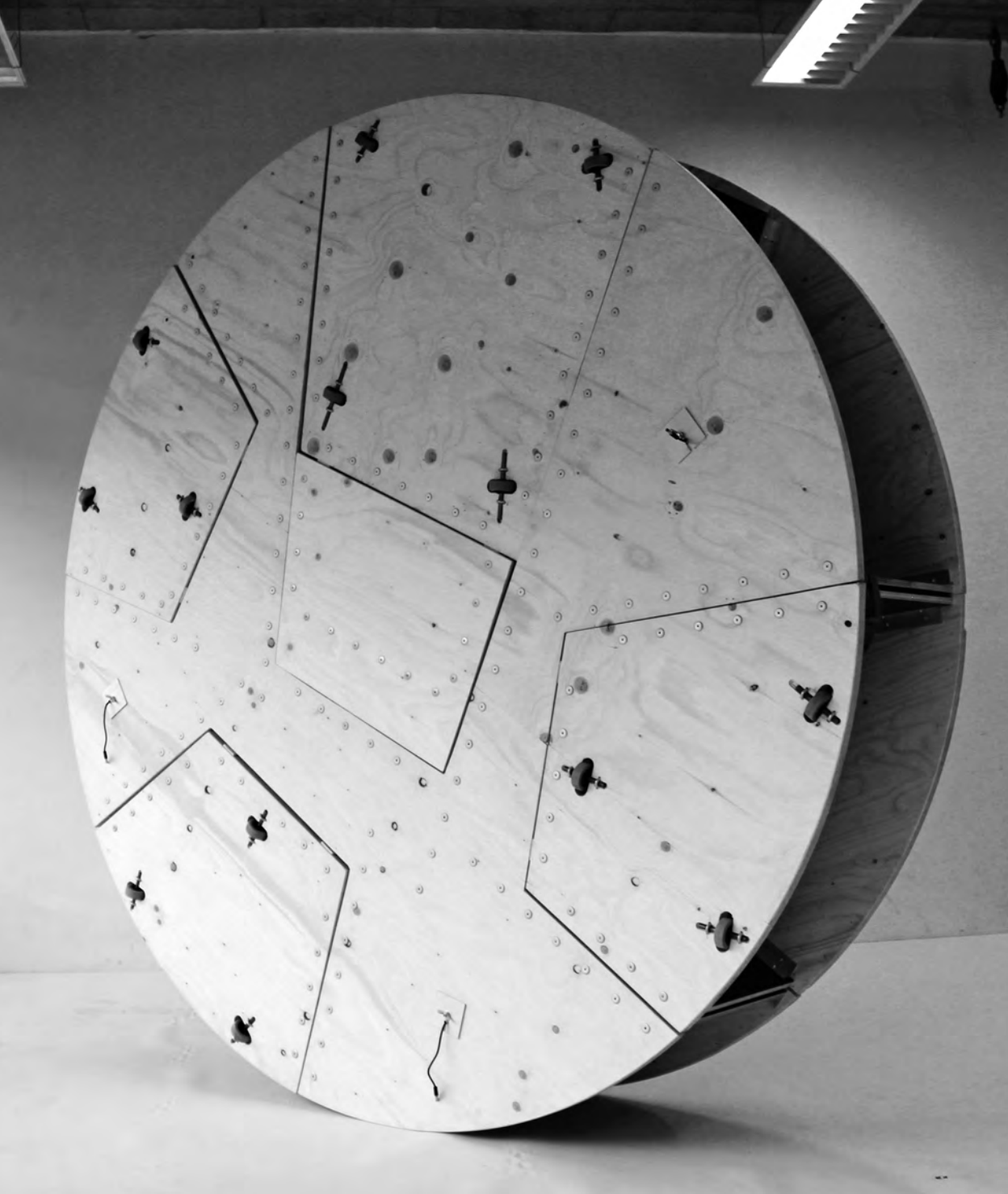


There's always the risk of a project failing. Isn't that frustrating?



Reef Bench

TR “If a project isn’t realised, this doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a failure. We were asked by a Montessori school in Arnhem to realise a study area in their auditorium. It was a tall room, so it seemed logical to create a separate space that was raised above ground level. It turned out our idea of a bamboo nest wasn’t feasible in financial terms. Right now, we’re experimenting with lamps in the same shape and with the principle of interlaced strips. The only difference is we’re working on a different scale and using plastic instead of bamboo.”



TR “Our ambition is to apply ideas and knowledge of materials and techniques in a range of different projects. That’s a lot more efficient than constantly re-inventing the wheel, and it makes our work more recognisable. Think once, sell twice – that should be our new motto [laughs]!”



Hoofdzaken

RV “That’s how improvising works. One idea leads to the other.”



RV “The woven baskets that Vietnamese farmers use to carry their chickens to the market served as an inspiration for a woven chair. But when we tried to make it, it turned out that bamboo easily snaps and splits. After all, it isn’t actually a wood – it’s a kind of grass. So we ended up making broader and broader strips, which are easy to glue. This ultimately resulted in a chair that seems to be made from bands of woven bamboo.”



Bamboo Chair

TR “The only structure that turned out to be strong enough was a semi-circular frame. This optimised form developed through improvisation. We would never have come up with it on paper beforehand.”



There are too few Western products made from bamboo. You end up developing an efficient manufacturing method for a snazzy chair. This sounds like an industrial design process: quite atypical for you, right?



Multi-Vase-Lamp

RV “Yes, it was. Usually, we have a lot more freedom in our design process. The Multi-vase, for example, started as a study into a multipurpose lamp. It’s a collage of household items. You can store your keys in it, or stick a newspaper in, or even a bouquet of flowers – and on top of that, it’s a lamp. This mix of functions developed more or less spontaneously.”

Multi-Vase-Lamp



Traditionally, the practice of using objets trouvés is sooner associated with the fine arts.



TR “Marcel Duchamp played with viewers’ expectations by using everyday, seemingly random objects in his art. Of course, that urinal wasn’t simply a urinal, but rather the embodiment of an idea. The Multi-vase also leaves users room to make their own interpretations. To a large extent, you’re free to decide for yourself what the object is to you. All we basically do is create the conditions.”

Chandelier



RV “They showed the Multi-vase at Art Basel/Design Miami, by the way – where you can also find galleries with elegant Venetian glass objects. Don’t you love the idea: our vase with glassware from the charity shop standing between that kind of stuff?”



TR “And getting sold!”



Notepad Table

You operate on the interface of art and design...



TR “No, we make design! If only because our projects serve a practical purpose.”



RV “Exhibitions can often be quite ponderous. White walls, bare ceilings, aloof pedestals. We wanted to present our work as useful objects rather than art. That’s why we put our designs on a sea of coffee cups – giving the presentation an agreeable lightness. If you were to leave the door open, the whole installation would blow away.



Indeed, the plastic coffee cup is one of the most frequently-discarded products of our times. By using it in our show, we want to emphasise how ephemeral design really is.”



TR “Our designs have more layers like that...”



Exhibition Furniture

... Sometimes, people are specifically interested in one aspect; other times, they home in on a different layer. Our work provides room for this.”



We consciously try to give our work a positive vibe.



Club House

We invite people to participate.



TR “After all, as a society, we can’t leave everything to the banks or the government. We need to work together to make things happen. And we hope to contribute to this. We want to connect people.”