



Chameleon Man

He may be alone in his ability to combine science with glamour and adjust to all possible clients. It's time to meet unconventional and innovative French designer **MATHIEU LEHANNEUR**, who seems to have invented the term crossdisciplinary.

Interview by Merel Kokhuis. Portrait by Sébastien Agnetti.

What should we know about Mathieu Lehanneur?

I don't know. Who is Mathieu Lehanneur? I'm a 35-year-old designer, based in Paris. When I grew up I wanted to become an artist. I wanted to paint, make installations, etc. But, after a couple of months at art school in Versailles I figured I would be a very bad artist. And then design appeared to be an easier field to me. Easy in a way that there's always an answer. If your design object is not beautiful, you can always say it's functional. And if it's not functional at all, you can say; hey, but at least it's beautiful. So, in that way I always avoid having people think that I'm a bad artist.

But is there a difference between art and design?

The boundaries are blurry, you can easily move from the first to the second. But in design the first step is always the request, the question from the client. That's where you start. Even if you end up not answering that question it was your starting point. In art there is no question. Art is a way for artists to express themselves. They don't work for a client, but have to find their own question. And I need a question. I need the question from outside to open my mind. In contradiction to some other designers, I don't have any problem working with the demands of a client. I need it, and I love it.

Is that your standard way of working?

Yes, and it already started when I was graduating from the ENSCI design school in Paris. The teachers asked me to write a thesis on a design-

related topic. I couldn't come up with my own subject; I needed questions from others that I could answer. I asked five people from different professions to provide me with the most important question in their job, and then I tried to find answers for them. You can think of a financial controller, a doctor, a psychologist. The psychologist, for example, asked me why parents always think they are smarter than their kids. Her question inspired me to develop an IQ test that was suitable for all ages. There were no good or bad answers, just solutions and choices. The goal was not to give the perfect answer; my goal was to show that, as a designer, I am able to adjust to different professional fields, even if the brief is far removed from my own profession.

Do you still work like that now, 10 years after graduating?

Always! I ask the client for a brief all the time. Sometimes it's just one word, but that's ok. I personally try to find an answer to the question or a solution to the problem the client gives me. My colleagues help me with the research. I design the object in my head and draw it on the white board. And from that one of my colleagues finalizes the details on the computer. Before I hand over the project it should be clear in terms of - even though I hate the words - concept or scenario. Most of the time the shape is not defined by that stage. I believe the mind is the best tool with which to design, better than white paper or the computer. The mind is best able to visualize the idea. You can turn the object around in your head, change it immediately. It's fast and efficient. Brains can draw more than hands. When I drive through Paris on my motorcycle, my projects all get an equal share of my brain's attention.

You are now working for Biotherm. Can you describe the process so far?

The cosmetic company Biotherm asked me to think of a way to communicate something which is not so easy. Thermal plankton is one of the ingredients in some of their products. It's a good and efficient thing but Biotherm is afraid people don't like the fact that there's bacteria, living micro organisms, in, for example, their facial cream. They saw my micro algae project and admired the way I made an unsexy product appealing. They



LOCAL RIVER,
home storage unit for fish
and greens, 2008
Materials glass blown
& thermoformed, water
pump, joints
Client: Artists Space, New



wanted me to do the same for their thermal plankton - to turn it into a glamorous object. To combine science with a glamorous approach.

Why did you immediately start your own company after graduating? No need to get more experienced first?

I was absolutely sure I wanted my own design firm immediately. I am the youngest of six kids, so I was always the little one everybody was trying to watch, teach and raise. I didn't want to work for another designer because I didn't want another father, I wanted to do it all by myself. I didn't want anybody to tell me what I should or shouldn't do. But I don't think you can say it was a real company in the beginning. It was just me, alone on my bed with my laptop. Only after four years did I hire my first employee. Before I started I did one internship, though. Not at a design firm, but at a graphic design agency. Funny thing is, because I never worked for another designer I don't know how a designer should work. I never learned the

rules. But after some time I developed my own system. The only problem I still have sometimes is the time-money question. How much time should I spend on one project with regards the budget the client gives me? I have to admit I sometimes wonder how Philippe Starck would do it. Or Ron Arad. I'm not saying I want to do it exactly like them, I just wonder.

It's an interesting and unexpected choice to go to a graphic design agency. Why exactly?

The graphic designer I'm talking about was one of my teachers at the design school. He had to teach graphic design, but he spoke about everything other than graphic design. He talked about people, magic, etc. But not about his profession. It was a kind of storytelling, not in a marketing approach, but in a real way. I was extremely interested in this way of working. For each new project he transformed into a new person. He reinvented himself over and over again and did a lot of research. You have to know this is a very

tiring way of working, it demands a lot from a person. I had absolutely no interest in graphic design whatsoever, I just admired this man. Under his supervision I developed myself and am now able to adjust to the needs of several different clients. I work on a project for an eleventh century Roman church, for the French postal company La Poste, etc. I'm glad I don't have to choose. I want to jump from history to technology and back.

Is that why you collaborate with people from so many different fields?

Absolutely! Ever since I worked on my graduation project I try to involve other disciplines. Cross-discipline is a great thing. For my scientific projects I collaborate with David Edwards, a science professor at Harvard. It's fantastic that people want to work with me because they recognize a specific approach in my work. The job to do the Roman church was an indirect result of my previous work. The priest of the church valued how deep I dive into my projects. I am not specialized in religion, or in furniture, but he still wanted me to design the new altar, pulpit and baptism basin. He liked the way I try to make the new context my own. Eventually I designed it in a way that it seems to emerge from the floor, as if it was already there before the church was built. The stone I used emits a special kind of energy and gives visitors the idea that it's only the top of the mountain; the rest must be underneath the surface, just like an iceberg.

Many of your designs are influenced by nature. Can we speak about an obsession with nature?

Many people think I'm obsessed with nature, but I'm not. When you ask me how I, as a nature lover, can live in the big and polluted city of Paris, I have an easy answer. I don't have to be in Paris, I just am. After my graduation I never really left. Maybe I will move to the countryside in ten or twenty years, I don't know. But it's not because of an obsession with nature, not even a special interest. I don't especially care about nature and I don't care about science, either. In fact I have a special interest in human beings. The human being is a complex creature. Complex in terms of chemistry, psychology, physiology. And we are always in contact, in relation with our surroundings. These surroundings can be the global environment, a church, a family, a lover. The things I make, I design to improve the daily life of the people around me. To improve city life.

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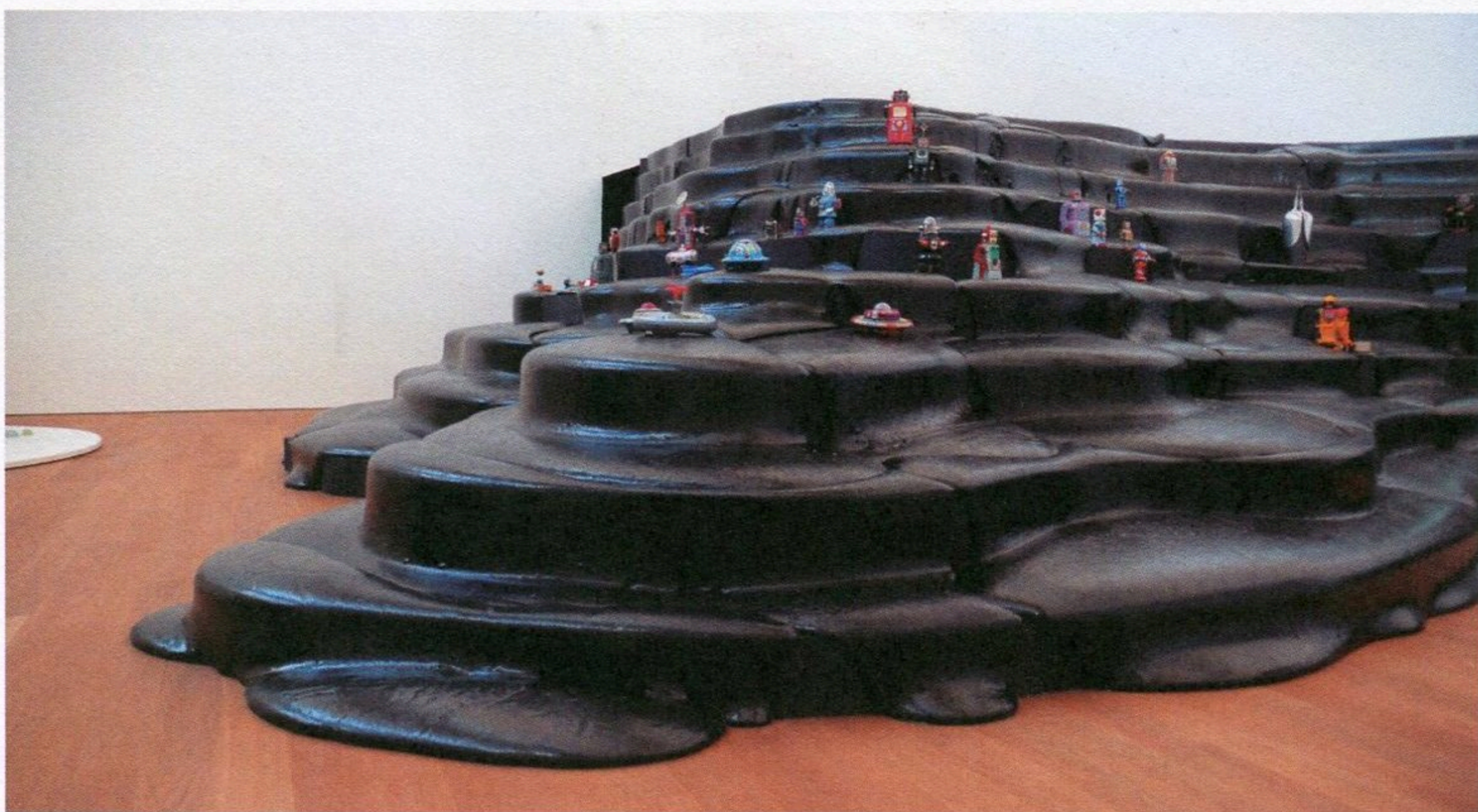
ANDREA, living air purifier absorbing undesired effects
of contaminated air by the profusion of manufactured goods, 2009

In collaboration with David Edwards, Harvard University

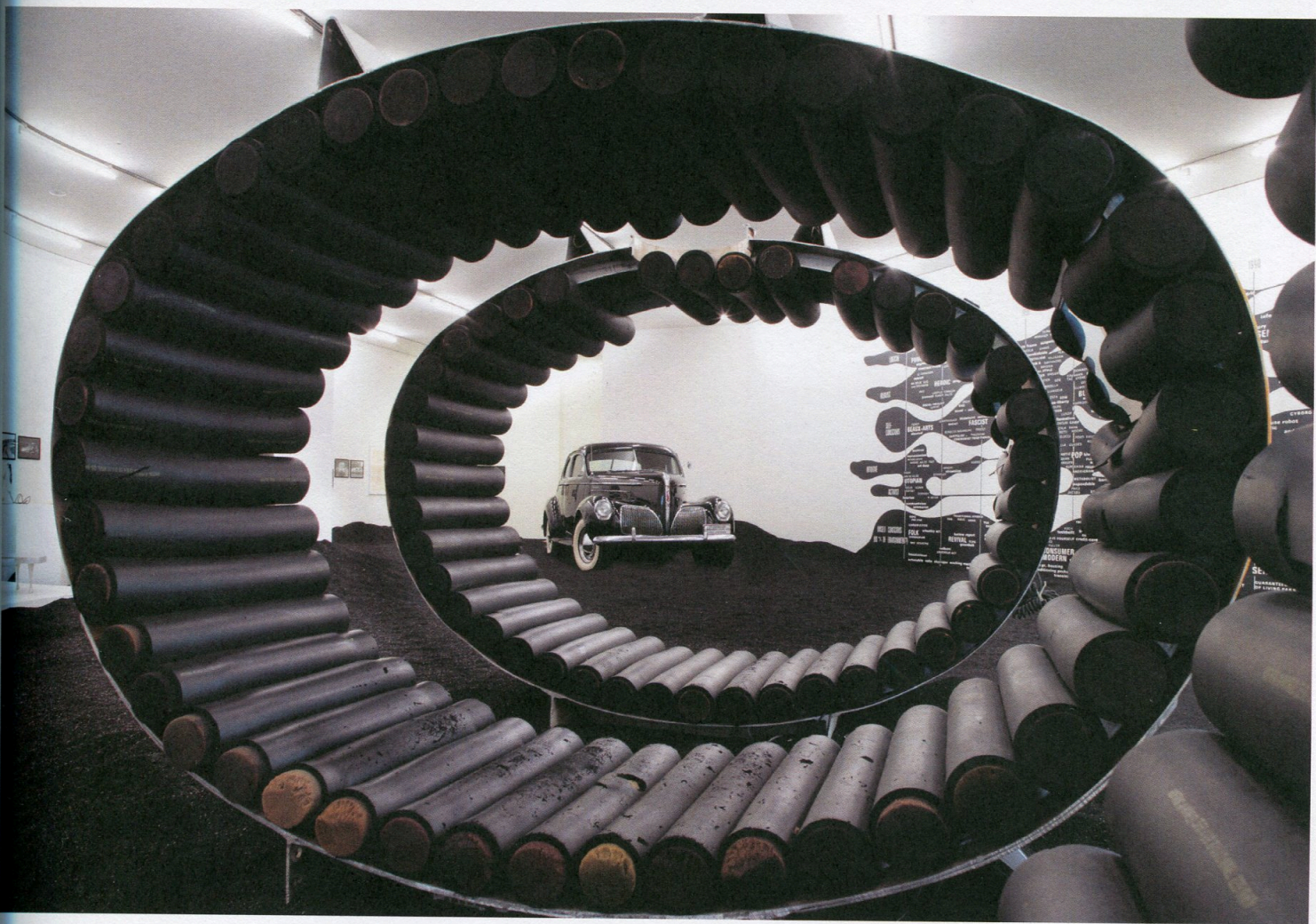
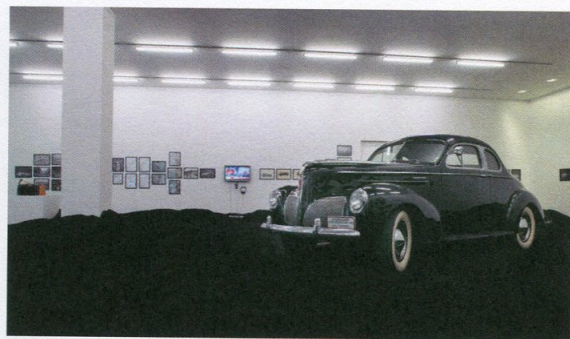
Client: Le Laboratoire

Award Best Invention Award, Popular Science, USA



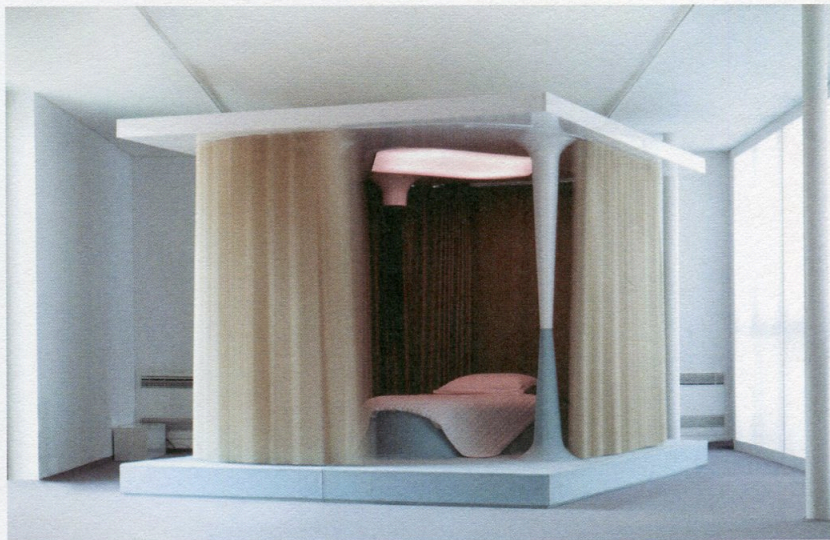


Scenography of **TOMORROW NOW** – Exhibition at Mud
(Museum of Modern Art Luxembourg). 2010





THE ISLAND, by Airmineral
Natural Marine Biospray



ONCE UPON A DREAM, Sleeping Capsule, 2010
 Designed for Hôtel de Marc, Rheims for Veuve Clicquot
 Presented at the design fair in Zona Tortona, Milan &
 during London's design week



Interior design of **ST HILLAIRE CHURCH** in Melle, France, 2010

