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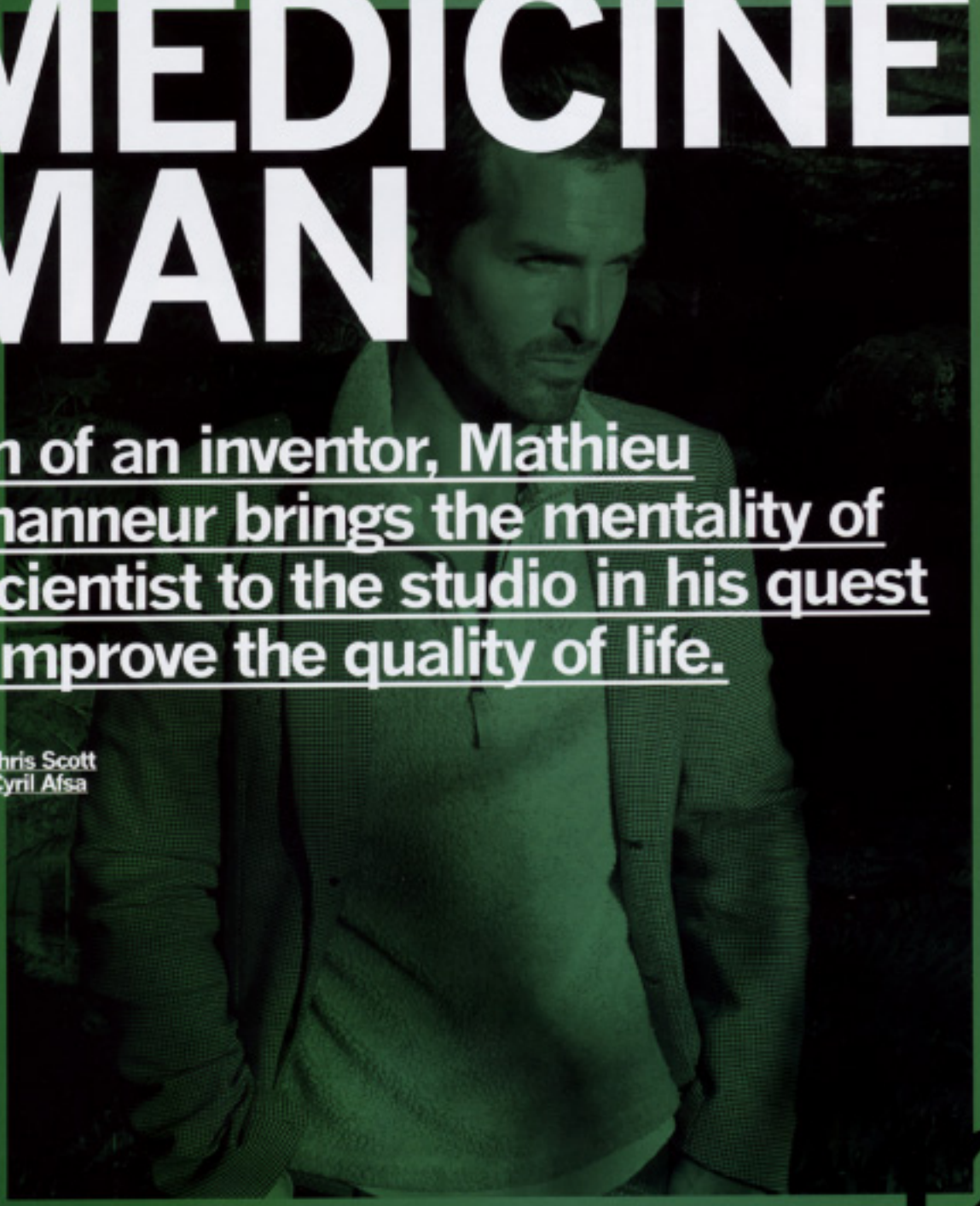
THE GREAT INDOORS ISSUE #60 JAN/FEB 2008

NATURE & ARTIFICE

THE MEDICINE MAN



Son of an inventor, Mathieu Lehanneur brings the mentality of a scientist to the studio in his quest to improve the quality of life.

Words Chris Scott
Photos Cyril Afsa

12 PAGES

View into Flood, a Paris restaurant designed by Mathieu Lehanneur.

To understand Paris-based designer Mathieu Lehanneur and his work, you need to know a thing or two about his background. No doubt his inquisitive, searching mind has something to do with his parentage. Lehanneur's father is an engineer who holds patents for such inventions as lightweight aerodynamic bicycle spokes and a simple ball system that removes microorganisms from the water supply. He encouraged and inspired his six children, all of whom followed in his footsteps before eventually branching off to do their own thing.

Uncertain as to the exact direction to take, and before it became clear that he would end up in design, Mathieu considered a career in medicine. Ultimately, however, he entered the École nationale supérieure de création industrielle (ENSCI) in Paris. This school is open to students 24 hours a day and functions like a laboratory and workshop – ideal for Lehanneur's inquisitive mind. It's here he developed his unique take on objects and, not unexpectedly, chose medicine as the subject of a graduation project for which he did extensive research and designed a range of 'therapeutic objects' that explore the relationship between patients and their illnesses. The results of this study are now part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Whether working as scientist or designer, Lehanneur considers nature his closest ally

Preferring to go it alone rather than to join an existing company, Lehanneur established a firm in 2001, marking the start of a career in which he has won various grants and prizes. In 2005 he captured the prestigious Carte Blanche du VIA (Valorisation de l'Innovation dans l'Ameublement), an award given by the agency set up to promote French design. Health and quality of life have always been subjects of particular interest to Lehanneur. The VIA project, which Lehanneur entitled Elements, proved to be especially fascinating. Elements is a collection of five intelligent objects, indicated by letters – dB (white noise diffuser), O (oxygen generator), K (daylight receiver-transmitter), C° (infrared heating) and Q (Quinton spray, immunity stimulator) – whose potential, unfortunately and surprisingly, has not been fully realized in today's health-obsessed society. The five objects react to body temperature and movement. They create microenvironments that feature light, air quality and background noise: external factors that have a major influence on the physical and mental condition of human beings. Although radically different from other entries to the VIA competition, Elements impressed the jury so much that it was willing to risk giving the award to an in-depth project still in the making: after receiving the prize, Lehanneur had only one year to prepare his work for presentation at the Paris and Milan furniture fairs.

Not at all surprising was Lehanneur's involvement – a direct result of Elements – with the design of Flood, a restaurant that promotes a better quality of life not only by serving healthy food from around the world but also by offering its clientele a unique 'atmosphere' in the literal sense of the word. True to its name, the restaurant is flooded with light and air and, to give diners an extra boost of vitality, the air is flooded with oxygen released by an abundance of aquarium plants.

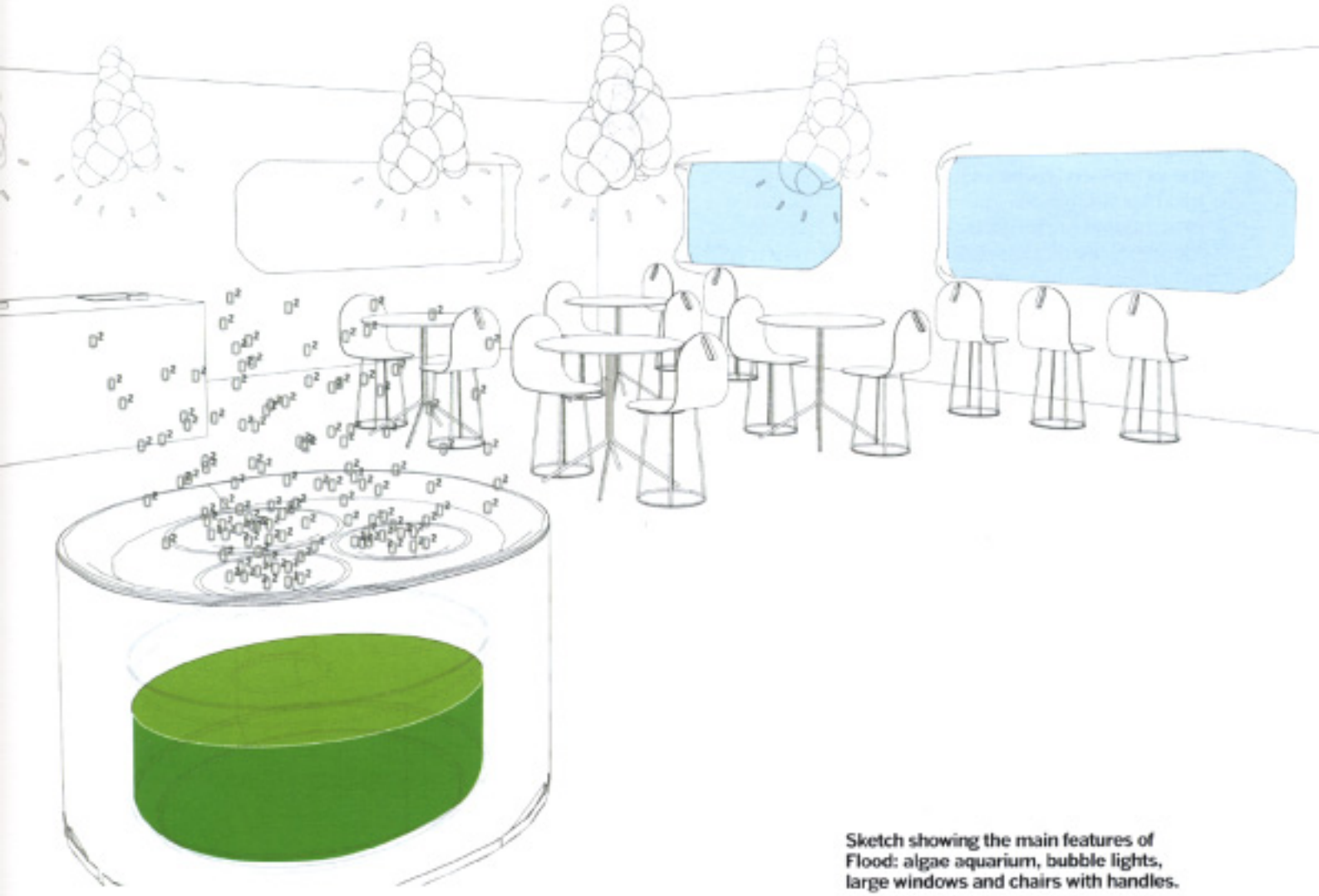
Where other designers play around with different material and finishes, Mathieu Lehanneur experiments with micro-algae and photosynthesis.

A big idea, a small budget and a single designer for the interior and all the furnishings: Mathieu Lehanneur. He applied the 'flood' theme to the furniture by dipping the metal frames of tables and chairs in PVC. Boasting seats that resemble leaves, Flood's chairs are lightweight, stable and comfortable; each backrest is fitted with a handle for easy use. Additional seating for customers enjoying a quick snack lines windows framed in deep, rounded, resin-reinforced plaster mouldings. Lamps were made by Swiss artisan and manufacturer Matteo Gonnet. Fluorides added to the glass create the milky-white opaline look of these irregularly shaped luminaires, which are blown over wire frames. The designer would have liked to accentuate the lightness of the furniture with larger lights, but this part of his plan proved to be technically impossible.

By far the most striking element is a centrally positioned aquarium of moulded plastic, which is a larger version of one of the five Elements that thrust Lehanneur into the spotlight in 2005. Illuminated from within, the aquarium is filled with *Spirulina platensis*: microscopic algae that emit a green glow. Through the process of photosynthesis, these algae produce pure oxygen and thus help purify the air in the restaurant. The biologist involved in the project cultivated 100 litres of *Spirulina platensis* and confirmed its resistance to variations in temperature before the aquarium could be put into operation. Minimal wall decoration – the Flood logo, also by Lehanneur – represents the diffusion of oxygen throughout the space.

The overall impression in one of a sci-fi film set that doubles as a deluxe American deli. Despite engendering the desire to while away the hours in a haven of pure air, Flood is open only during the day →

Dominating the restaurant is a large aquarium filled with algae that produce fresh oxygen.



Sketch showing the main features of Flood: algae aquarium, bubble lights, large windows and chairs with handles.

and is meant as a venue for fast consumption. Elaborate meals are not part of the menu, but many a guest lingers longer than intended, exchanging the noise and stench of traffic for tranquillity and clear air, despite the lack of fancy food and Wi-Fi: all something of an extravagance in the centre of a city where property prices are sky high. Paris claims three Flood restaurants at the moment, but the concept would seem to be a logical solution for eateries

Even the logo of the Flood restaurant is the work of Mathieu Lehanneur.

in other cities where pollution is a problem. Another area that Lehanneur excels in is exhibition design. Here, too, his input goes beyond the bare bones of a project. His multifaceted approach made him the obvious choice for the design of Tomorrow Now, an exhibition held earlier this year at Mudam, Luxembourg's major museum of modern art. The exhibition explores the interaction between science fiction and design. Lehanneur was set to work without a brief, which he says is quite unusual, adding that 'I've never been as free'. Not surprisingly, he rejected the conventional exhibition design – a backdrop for the items on display – and added things to the exhibition instead. He used the entire budget at his disposal to make objects that would enhance the presentation of the different themes. Large black mobile cubes lent visitors access to this futuristic world whose undulating lunar landscape featured mountains of black foam. UFO-style lights, also manufactured by Matteo Gonnet, loomed overhead, as did strange black zeppelins that kept everyone in the building under surveillance. The film footage produced was projected elsewhere in the gallery. The success of the exhibition theme may have been debatable, but Lehanneur's additions were well worth seeing, as his creations were as interesting as many of the exhibits.

Another exhibition in which Lehanneur's contribution was almost as impressive as the items displayed was Irrésistible Reflets, staged by silverware house Christofle during the annual Designer Days in Paris. For this project, he received the briefest of briefs – 'reflections' – which inspired him to make a huge illuminated dome from standard fluorescent tubing commonly used in the automobile industry to check the quality of paintwork. The fragile circular components were constructed by Échelle 1 and assembled on site to form an arresting cupola measuring a full 5 m in diameter. The circles reflected light off the surfaces of the elegant Christofle tableware below.

The recently opened Le Laboratoire in Paris, founded and financed by scientist and Harvard professor David Edwards, is a hub of creative, artistic and scientific experimentation. Right up Lehanneur's street, without a doubt, and it came as no surprise to hear that he was one of the first designers to be involved with this exciting forward-thinking project. The aim of the initiative is to create a space where scientists and artists can combine their talent and know-how with the forces of nature.

Lehanneur has already worked closely with Edwards to create Bel-Air, an air-filtering system housed in a bell-shaped container. In the 1980s, after discovering high levels of toxic materials in the bodies of astronauts, NASA studied the possibilities of using plants to neutralize and filter harmful substances. Earthbound humans are also exposed to gases from glues, paints, plastics and the like. Bel-Air relies on spider plants as a natural filter; air passes via the leaves to the roots, where it filters out – through a process of absorption – undesirable toxic gases before returning the air to the environment. Bel-Air and Elements will be presented at the Design & Elastic Mind exhibition in February 2008 at the MoMA in New York City.

'Lehanneur's exhibition design is aimed at various perceptions of reality and feelings of repulsion, exhortation, the sublime, distress and worry' **Alexandra Midal**

Lehanneur has attracted a variety of interesting clients, a fact that obviously delights him. Recently he has been collaborating with Yohji Yamamoto and Mandarina Duck – two high-profile innovators on the fashion scene working together under the name Y's Mandarina – on a presentation stand for a new line of accessories. Other projects in the world of fashion and beauty include joint ventures with both Paco Rabanne and Issey Miyake. Lehanneur has assumed the position of art director for all Paco Rabanne products in 2008-2009, and for Miyake he is working on perfume packaging. The near future will see him design an exhibition of pieces by digital artists in New York. And there's the challenge of redesigning the interior of a Romanesque church in Melle in the Deux-Sèvres region of France. Asked about the future, he simply says: 'I'd like to continue the kind of work I'm doing, with clients who give me freedom and are willing to take risks with me.' Whether he approaches that work as scientist or designer, Lehanneur will always consider nature his closest ally.

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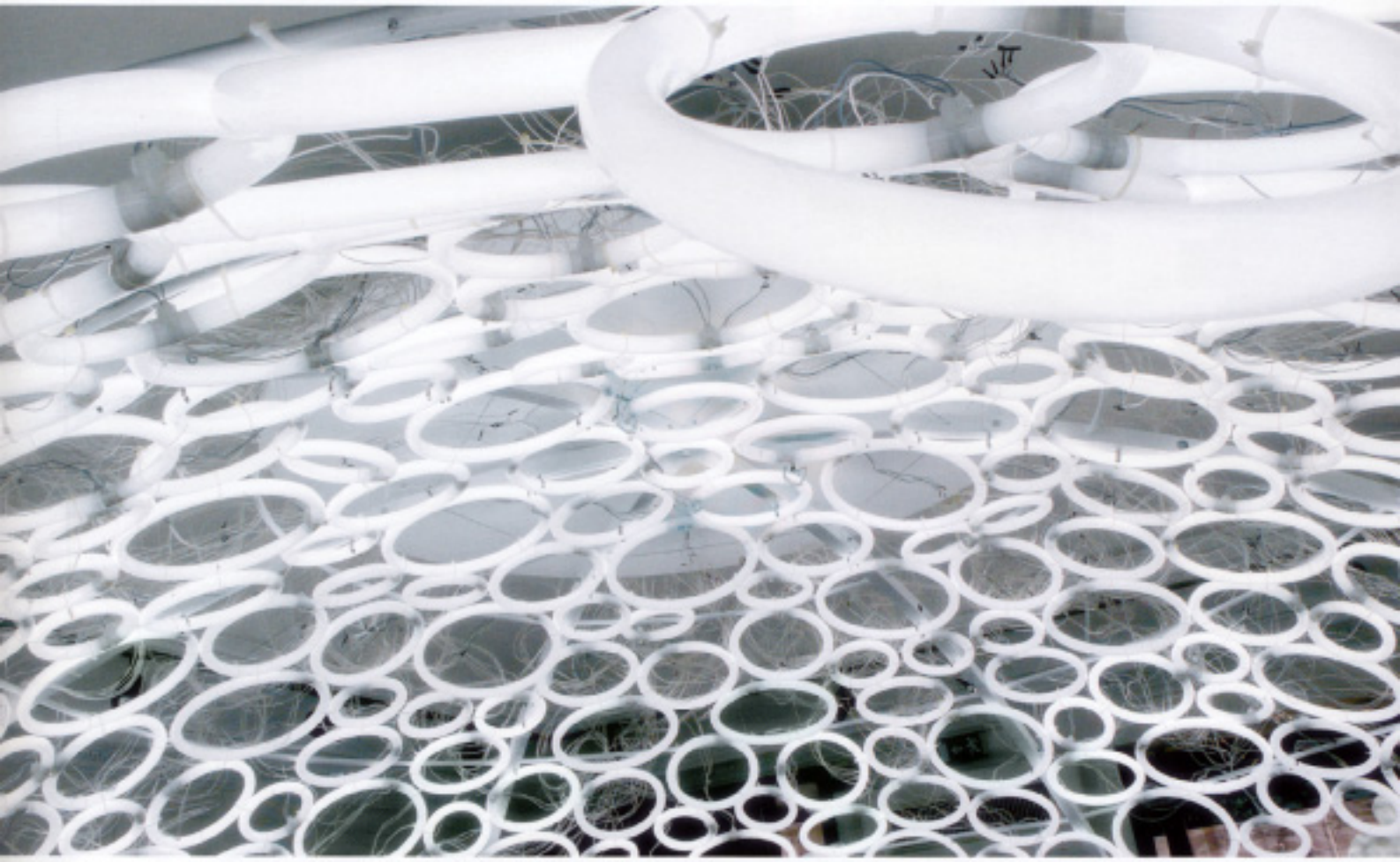
The overall impression is one of a sci-fi film set that doubles as a deluxe American deli

Blown glass pendants designed by Mathieu Lehanneur for restaurant Flood in Paris. The logo on the wall of the restaurant is also by Lehanneur.

Pedestals of black-lacquered wood support displays of Christofle silverware beneath an illuminated cupola that re-creates daylight conditions deep in the heart of the shop.

The cupola is made of standard neon lighting commonly used in the automobile industry. The lacquered surface below sets up a play of reflections on the silverware.



↑ A stepped terrace coated in black polyurethane foam forms a suitable, if unsettling, backdrop for small exhibits.

↑ Hovering above the exhibits are little zeppelins fitted with surveillance cameras, turning visitors into witnesses by showing what is happening elsewhere in the museum at the same time.

↓ A rolling landscape of rubber particles colonizes one gallery of the Mudam.

↓ Foreground: TV Tank, LOT-EK, 1998.
↓ Background: Studebaker Commander Business Coupé, Raymond Loewy, 1940 (left) and Evolutionary tree to the year 2000, Charles Jencks, 1969 (right).

↑ Bel-Air is a live filter that cleans contaminated air by absorbing undesirable gases emitted by manufactured goods. Made of Pyrex and aluminium and fitted with a fan, Bel-Air contains plants noted for their ability to purify air.

↑ According to Lehanneur, dB possesses the 'sensibility of a domestic animal'. Made of ABS, a two-phase polymer blend, dB is a sphere that rolls around measuring noise levels. When they are too high, dB responds by emitting white noise that nullifies the negative effect of the disturbance on the brain.
Photo: Véronique Huyghe

↓ C° is an infrared heater that acts as an intelligent campfire. Made of thermoplastic elastomer and fitted with a heat-sensitive camera, the object reads body temperature and responds accordingly. Dimensions (h x ø): 25 x 66 cm.
Photo: Véronique Huyghe

↓ Q is an atmospheric airlock between inside and outside that is activated when someone enters the room. Made of stainless steel coated in PVC, Q creates a mini-environment around the body that helps it fight microbes.
Photo: Véronique Huyghe