



Elementary Particles

Empathetic to users and sensitive to their surroundings, Mathieu Lehanneur's household objects give a human touch to intelligent design

Story CLARA YOUNG

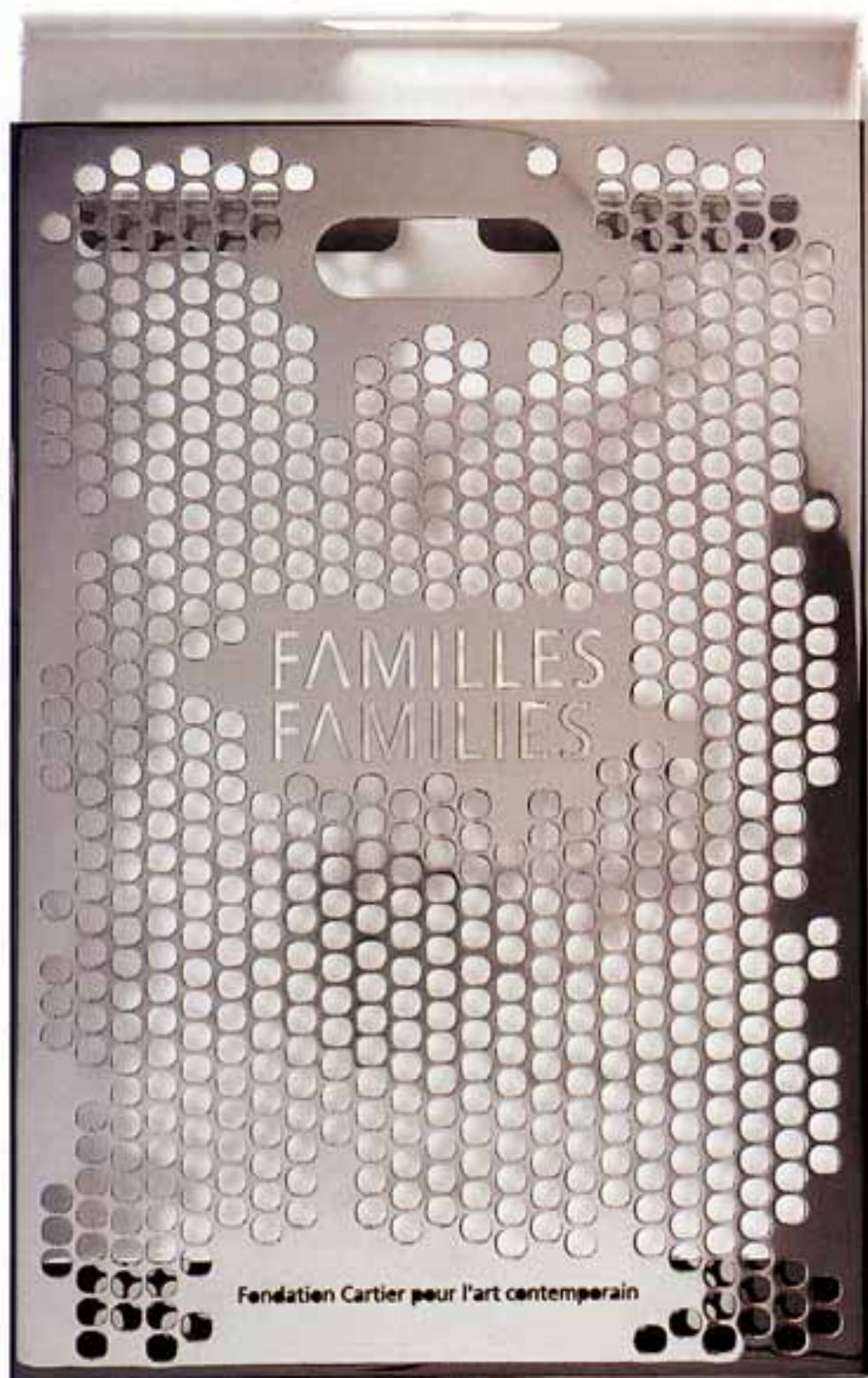
When strong light hits our eyes, our pupils contract. This is one of the thousands of reflex operations our body carries out daily to keep itself alive and as comfortable as possible. In his interiors collection, Elements, Mathieu Lehanneur borrows the idea of biological reflexes for C, K, O and dB – objects that, like our bodies, constantly adapt to changes in temperature, light intensity, oxygen levels and environmental noise to create optimum living conditions.

An abstract version of a small campfire, C begins emitting heat when it senses that body temperature has fallen below a comfortable degree. Heat sensors, infra-red heat emitters and memory-shape alloys are enclosed inside an inverted cone of tiered elastomer bands. This mechanism allows C to sense bodies in close proximity and respond to drops in temperature with waves that ripple through the structure like crackling flames. Drawing on similar sensory principles, the K dodecahedron is entirely covered with fiber optic hairs that monitor light levels and emit a white 10,000-lux light when the intensity over a 24-hour period falls below the norm. O, a transparent bell-glass-shaped aquarium filled with *Spirulina Platensis*, activates a photosynthetic process, manufacturing pure oxygen during periods of high pollution. The dB ball rolls toward disquieting, high-decibel noises, a crying baby for example, neutralizing the disturbance with calming white noise.

"They're 'living objects' that are responsive," says Lehanneur. "I wanted to come up with an alternative to 'intelligent houses' – scary, enormous *Big Brother* homes that run everything by themselves. I find them quite totalitarian." Elements is deliberately small and friendly, employing touchy-feely technology. K is just a little larger than your head and dB rolls around like a playful puppy. "There is technology integrated into these objects, but they don't look especially hi-tech. These are not intelligent objects," explains the designer. "They only react to one condition: Where is the sound? Is there enough heat? What's important is that there's an interaction between these objects and the people around them, and we can see them working." >

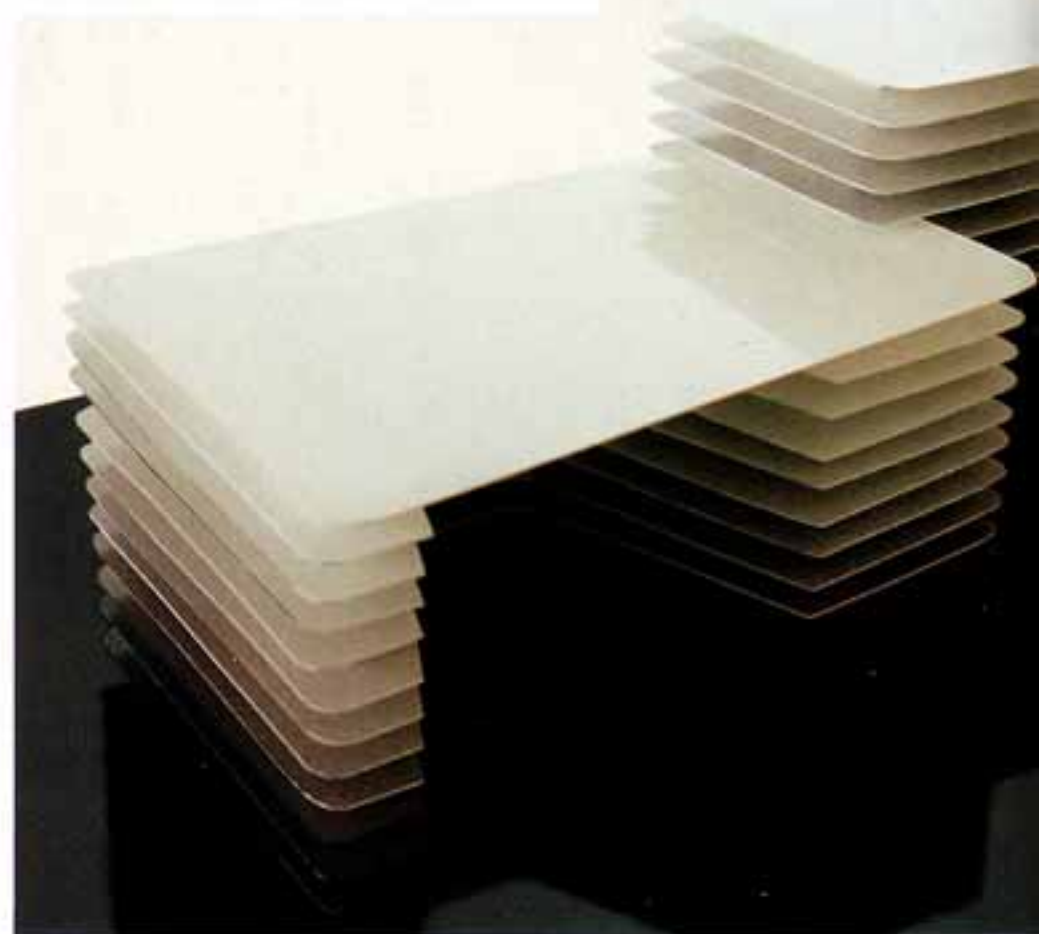


COMFORT ZONES: The protagonists of Mathieu Lehanneur's Elements series are, clockwise from top left, O (Oxygen), K (Kelvin), Q (Quinton), C (Celsius) and dB (Decibel)
Photography VERONIQUE HUYGHE



BASIC INSTINCT: Families (far left), a stainless steel photography portfolio case designed for Paris' Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art that is based on the idea of a family of cells; and Strate (below), an aluminum desk created for the Marseilles Design Center

Photography (portrait) RAPHAEL GIANNELLI-MERIANO (Families) & STUDIO SNAP SHOT



Symbiosis, psychology and simplicity have long driven Lehanneur's designs. A good example of this is Third Lung, which is part of a series of medical devices that he began in 1991. A flat box with flexible elastomer skin, Third Lung slowly fills with air and asthma medication spray throughout the night. In the morning, the box is swollen and distended. Reversing the usual dependent relationship between a user and his inhaler, the asthma sufferer "relieves" the lung by sucking in the air and medication.

A graduate of Paris' ENSCI (l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle), Lehanneur has carved out an atypical career for himself. For example, he has never worked for Philippe Starck, an apprenticeship that appears on the resumes of most French industrial designers. And his only client-based work – besides a new perfume bottle he is working on for Issey Miyake – are scenographies he creates for museum and gallery exhibitions. Instead, he has built up a repertoire of prototypes that await the right manufacturer. They range from medicinal aids, like his walnut-shaped "onion" of ingestible papers steeped in antibiotics, to a shelter for stray cats. Lehanneur's designs are cerebral, but never cold. His objects are interactive and humorous. Sometimes, he will take an object's function as the design's starting point, exaggerating it into a stylistic signature, as he does with Strate, a desk and shelving unit composed entirely of stacks of open-ended aluminum shelves.

Occasionally, Lehanneur will revive some antique piece of esoterica, like the gold water elixir alchemists believed would help man live forever, or the concentrated marine serum 19th-century French biologist René Quinton developed that physiologically matches

human blood plasma. From his readings about the latter, he created Q, another piece in the Elements series; this network of stainless steel tree branch tubes diffuses a mist of Quinton's famous ocean plasma intended to help fortify the immune system.

Most Lehanneur designs are too whimsical and conceptual for the mass market, but Elements is proving to be a commercial contender. A modified version of Q is soon to be available in limited edition by an undisclosed manufacturer, while giant-sized versions of the same model will be the centerpiece of Flood, a trio of new restaurants opening in Paris. "I don't want my work to remain conceptual," Lehanneur says. "I want my objects to be produced."

"Mathieu's work is empathetic in the way Richard Neutra defined design," says independent curator Alexandra Midal, who will include Lehanneur's work in a forthcoming show on design and science fiction at Luxembourg's Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean. "It's about the inter-relationship between ourselves and our surroundings – the notion that there is no hierarchy between objects and people," Midal says. A philosophy of the porous nature of our existence is woven through all of Lehanneur's work. Elements embodies that notion of designed interdependency. More household pets than autonomous robots, they are alphabetic aids for kinder, gentler living. **CY**