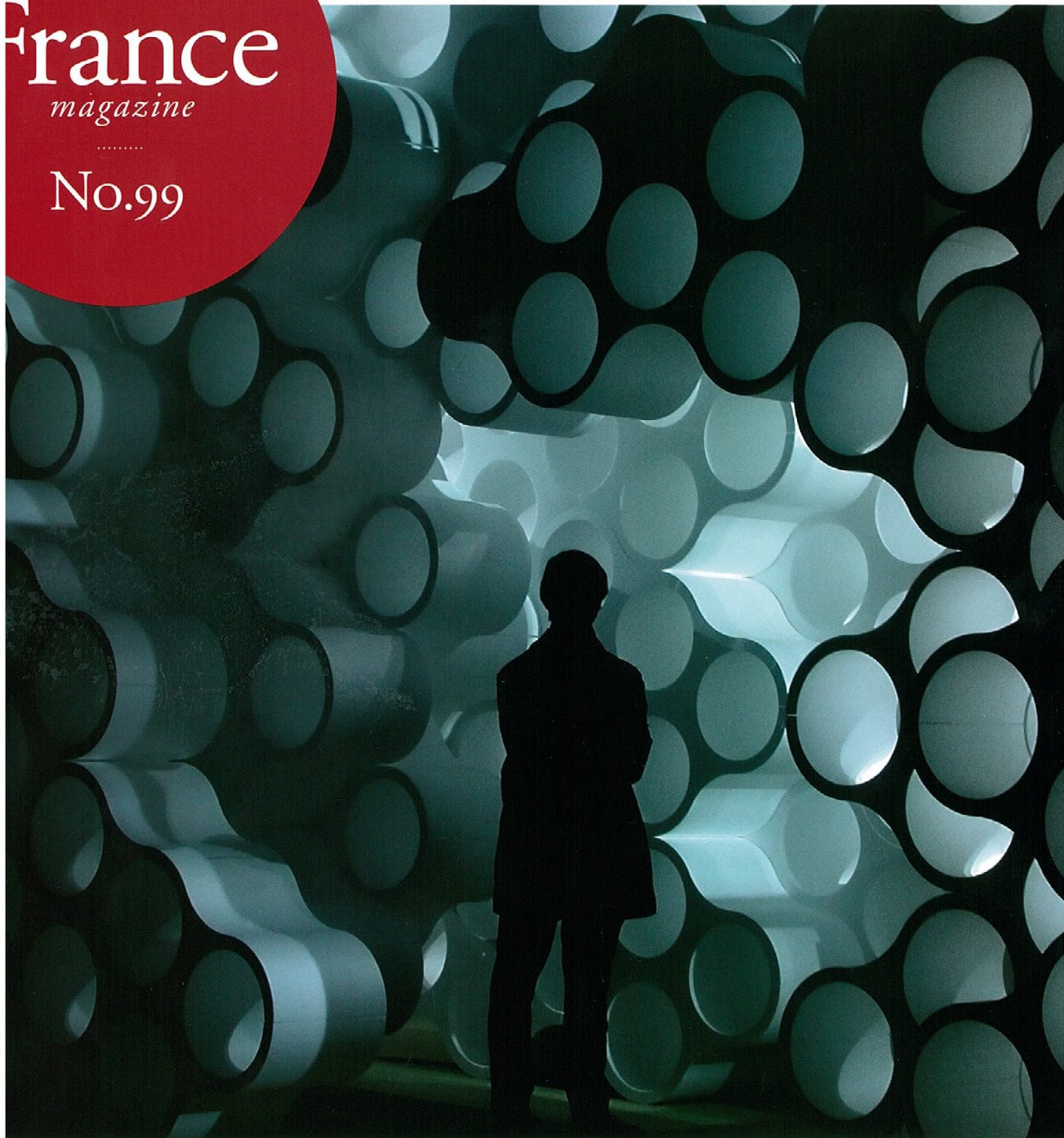


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THE DESIGN ISSUE

|| The Bouroullec Brothers + Pleyel's Piano Forte + Seats for the Seats of Power





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THE BROTHERS  
**BOURBONVILLE**

An intimate encounter with the very private duo that has rocked  
the design world—just in time for their first retrospective  
at the Centre Pompidou-Metz.

**BY AMY SERAFIN**



# I

t is characteristic of **RONAN** and **ERWAN** Bouroullec that they consider “Bivouac,” their career retrospective at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, an opportunity to look ahead, not back. The brothers have been pushing design into the future for more than a decade. “We don’t really see it as a retrospective,” explains Erwan at their Belleville atelier, surrounded by prototypes and drawings. “We’ve reached a point in our careers where we have a certain maturity, but as a result, we also have more doubt. We want to do more and do better.”

Opening October 7 and running through July 30, this is the Bouroullecs’ first major museum exhibition in France, though they have been celebrated abroad, notably at the Design Museum in London, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Their works have been acquired by such prestigious institutions as the Museum of Modern Art and the Centre Pompidou as well as by François Pinault, Karl Lagerfeld and other private collectors. They are often called the most important French designers since Philippe Starck, though they differ from him in style and self-promotion. Whereas Starck has designed everything from toilet brushes to catamarans in a manner that is self-knowingly witty and demanding of attention, the Bouroullecs’ creations are subtle, stripped to their essentials and quietly poetic.

The show in Metz is their biggest yet. Occupying more than 12,000 square feet, it comprises nearly all the brothers’ creations going back to 1998. Laurent Le Bon, the director of the museum, has been planning this exhibit since he wrote a book about Ronan and Erwan nearly a decade ago, when he was a young curator. “I fell in love with their work,” he explains. “I thought then that if I ever had the chance to head an institution, I would do an exhibition with them.” He compares visiting the show to walking through an enchanted forest and coming across clearings, each a universe unto itself.

The brothers, who famously control every aspect of what they do, organized the exhibition by ambiance rather than chronology, separating it with their signature partitions such as plastic “seaweed,”



← The poster for “Bivouac” features a collage of three Bouroullec instant-classics: their “Clouds” partition for Kvadrat (2008), “Piani” lamp for Flos (2011) and “Losanges” rug for Nanimarquina (2011).

→ **Algues 2004, Vitra**  
Functioning as a room divider or wall hanging, “Algues” reflects the Bouroullecs’ predilection for designs that can be customized by the buyer. Inspired by seaweed, the product features branch-like components that can be snapped together and assembled into an infinite variety of forms.



foam-and-fabric “clouds” and a wall of multicolored textile tiles. Hung on a wall 100 feet long and 13 feet high are 280 of their drawings, a combination of project studies and sketches they have done just for pleasure. They named the show “Bivouac” in reference to the versatile, modular nature of much of their work, and how their furnishings tend to provide shelter or reorganize a space.

It can be difficult to tell the brothers apart—both are pale and often unshaven, with reddish hair and intense blue eyes. Most of the time they can be found in their three-story atelier, discussing ideas, taking photographs, building prototypes. According to Erwan, “We may have achieved a certain level of public recognition, but we don’t live like rock stars. We work pretty much all the time, traveling less than other designers and participating in fewer events.” And while both have scaled back to regular office hours since starting families, they admit they are still always working in their heads.

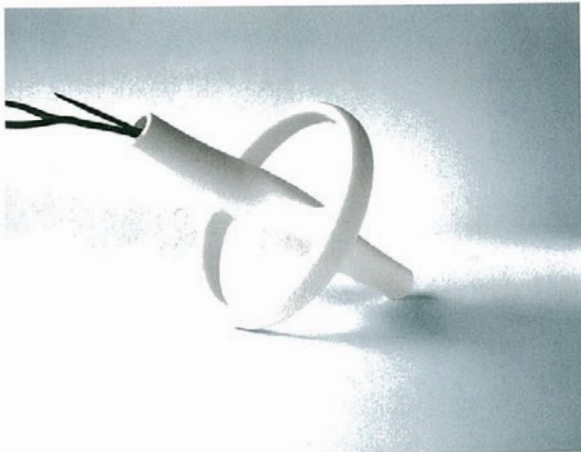
They are also extremely private, rarely agreeing to interviews and, when they do, avoiding questions about their personal lives. Ronan, the elder and shyer of the two, picks up a felt-tip pen and sketches throughout our conversation. He admits to being a control freak: “It comes from our age difference, the fact that I’m the big brother,” he explains. “I need to see everything, to correct every detail.” Erwan, 35, is more at ease, leaning back in his chair and smoking Marlboro Lights while he philosophizes. His interests run from Kurt Cobain to the pared-down sculptures of artist Donald Judd and the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Both would rather read books about







**V AND BOTTOM:**  
2007, *Vitra*  
table armchair was created  
g a precisely shaped knit  
veight metal frame like a  
ng.  
997, *Cappellini*  
lown purity of this  
arbonate vase typifies  
lecs' aesthetic.



**CENTER, BELOW AND BOTTOM:**

**Ploum 2011, *Ligne Roset***  
Inspired by the comfort of Ligne Roset's  
iconic "Togo" sofa, the award-winning  
Ploum is constructed like a "sandwich"  
of fabric and foam.

**Joyn Hut 2004, *Vitra***  
Conceived to meet the needs of the  
contemporary office, this is one element of  
a flexible system that allows team members  
to configure their own spaces.

**Assemblage 3 2004, *Prototype, Galerie Kreo***  
This multipurpose piece is part of a series  
that explores the creation of "atmospheres"  
for objects on display.







RIGHT, BELOW AND BOTTOM:

**Osso chair 2011, Mattiazzi**

Efforts to build with solid wood while minimizing waste gave rise to this oak, maple and ash chair, created using solar-powered, digitally controlled equipment.

**Lit Clos 2000, Limited Edition, Galerie Kreo**

A nod to the traditional raised beds of the Bouroullecs' native Brittany, the "Lit Clos" carves out a private sleeping area for people who live and work in the same open-plan space.



**"That we agree, that's the major principle of our work. We want to find an ideal solution together, not compromise with one another."**



prehistory (Erwan) or American Indians (Ronan) than about design.

They claim there is no hierarchy, and they sign everything jointly. "That we agree, that's the major principle of our work," says Ronan. "We want to find an ideal solution together, not compromise with one another." They do argue, of course, like most siblings—though less than press reports would have you believe, says Anniina Koivu. A former journalist, she spent a great deal of time with the brothers while writing the text for the new Phaidon monograph about them, due out in the spring (the previous one dates from 2003). "The public perception is that they fight all the time," she laughs. "I've seen them annoyed by one another, but I've never seen any fighting."

Growing up in Brittany, their age difference was too great for them to share friends or even go to the same schools together. They both started drawing as children, and their parents—neither of whom came from an arts background—were perceptive enough to enroll them in a Wednesday class at the local art academy. Ronan wasn't academically inclined, so he went to a high school that emphasized applied arts. "I had always hated school, but there I found the jumping-off point for a passion that never ended," he recalls. After graduation he moved to Paris and enrolled at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs.

Erwan, an excellent student, received his baccalaureate in science, then followed his brother to Paris to study fine arts. When Ronan started working, his younger brother helped out, and their transition to partnership sometime in 1999 came so naturally that neither one can recall the moment they became a design team. As Erwan describes it, "Before that, we lived together and did stuff together. Then later, there was a moment when we began creating a common body of work. It is fundamentally different and has linked us in a very particular way. We are interdependent, which is great and at the same time uncomfortable, psychologically speaking. Because the time comes when you ask yourself about genetics, stuff like that. You wonder, 'Am I worth anything alone?'"

Ronan had more of a chance to find that out, given that he started out on his own and quickly drew attention in his field. At the 1997 Salon du Meuble in Paris, he showed his "Disintegrated Kitchen," a basic wood and aluminum frame that could be customized by adding drawers, shelves and other elements. It caught the eye of Giulio Cappellini, whose eponymous design company was one of the most influential players of the late 20th century. "I fell in love with that beautiful product," recalls Cappellini in his rich Italian accent. "I told the people at the fair that I wanted to meet the designer. Someone said, 'Yes, he's here, we will call him.' I waited five minutes, 10 minutes, and nobody appeared. Finally I asked again, and was told he was out back because when he found out that Giulio Cappellini wanted to speak with him, he got very nervous. So I went to see him, and there he was in the back of the booth, smoking."

When asked for his version of the story, Ronan doesn't remember hiding—though he blushingly admits it could have happened—but he does remember that a journalist who was with Cappellini told him his life had just changed. "It was the type of comment that sounds ridiculous but actually was true," he remarks. Being part of Cappellini, he says, was the equivalent of playing for a major soccer team and propelled him to a whole new level.





**Clouds partition**  
2008, *Kvadrat*  
The sky's the limit when it comes to combining the components of the "Cloud" system, which can be used as a room divider, wall hanging or something entirely different, depending on the consumer. Shown here with the brothers' "Box" (2004) from Vitra and "Aio" coffeepot (2000) from Habitat.



**Facett 2005,**  
*Ligne Roset*  
An unassembled "Facett" chair hangs over a railing in the Bouroullecs' studio like a gigantic animal hide. Origami was one of the inspirations for this collection.



**A**

**S THAT UNCONVENTIONAL KITCHEN**

illustrated, the Bouroullecs introduced a brand-new idea of design. They were looking not simply to make better-looking chairs but entirely new categories of furniture. Influenced by no one, they began with a fresh slate, ultimately modifying the way people live and work.

“We really started out just the two of us. So we are, in a way, self-taught,” says Erwan. “Since we tinker around ourselves, we find our own solutions, trying to learn as much as possible in the process. We are always trying out an idea, revisiting it, building and rebuilding prototypes. It’s an extremely rigorous approach mixed with a certain inexperience. I think it is that combination that led us to the major discoveries in our work, like partitioning space.”

Early on they were asked to create the design for an exhibition, and they set out to do the simplest project possible: something with standard parts, easy to assemble and adaptable. They laser-cut elements out of polystyrene, creating forms that could be infinitely repeated and stacked to fit any interior. Afterwards, Cappellini marketed them as shelving components called “Brick.” The brothers would return to this concept again and again—mass-produced, three-dimensional components that could be assembled according to the user’s whim. “Algues,” for instance, consists of plastic elements that snap together into textured partitions resembling seaweed. Vitra has sold 4 million units since launching production in 2004.

In 2000, the brothers were invited to enter a competition to design the interior of Issey Miyake’s new A-POC boutique in the Marais. The Japanese clothing designer selected their application, then gave them three weeks to come up with a project and present it to him in Tokyo. Ronan had to be in Milan for a furniture fair, so Erwan went to see Miyake alone. “I had never been to Japan, had never made a long plane trip like that,” recalls Erwan. “I presented the project to Mr. Miyake. He said ‘Yes, that’s good.’ But he must have seen me as so young. I wasn’t even sure who he was. Well, I knew he was important, but not much more.”

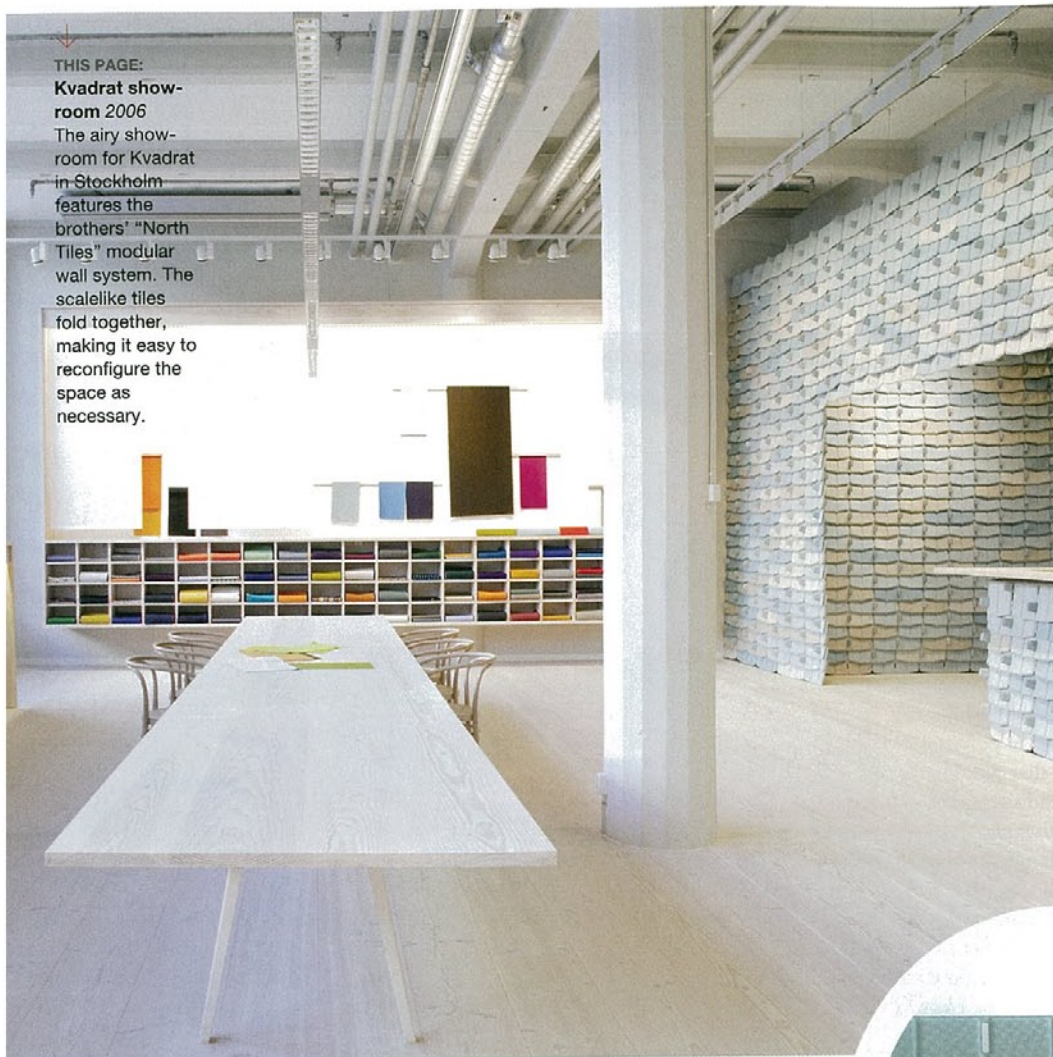
Contacted in Tokyo, Miyake explains that he chose the young designers because of a simple white bud vase they had created. “I recognized the values that have always guided me: purity, essentiality, innovation,” he responds. “But the Bouroullec brothers are also about experimentation, equilibrium, the work of the human hand disappearing behind the obviousness of a creation.”



**The Bouroullecs introduced a brand-new idea of design. They were looking not simply to make better-looking chairs but entirely new categories of furniture.**

Just as construction on the Paris store was about to start, Miyake came to town and stopped by the site. As Erwan tells it, “He came with 30 other people, but he had completely forgotten what the project looked like. He saw the prototype of our design elements and said, ‘You’re not going to put this everywhere?’ Then he saw a bit of old tile on the floor and said, ‘I hope you’re keeping that tile, it’s beautiful. And we need a hole to let light into the basement.’ In front of everyone I answered ‘No, Mr. Miyake, it’s not possible what you’re saying. The project isn’t that, you’re wrong.’ My brother was kicking me, trying to shut me up, and Mr. Miyake said, ‘This store is not yours, it’s mine.’ And he left, bam.” A few hours later and more refreshed after his long flight, Miyake called them into his office and reiterated his approval of their project. The brothers’ stubborn belief in their ideas and their resistance to



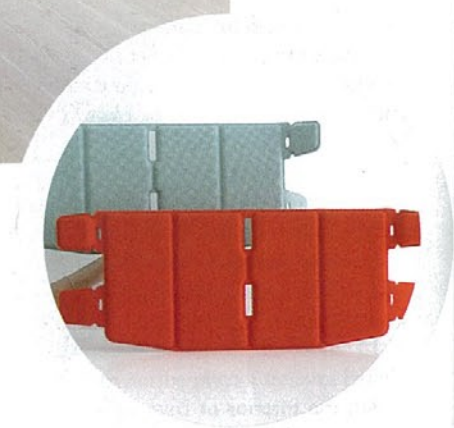


THIS PAGE:  
**Kvadrat show-  
 room 2006**  
 The airy show-  
 room for Kvadrat  
 in Stockholm  
 features the  
 brothers' "North  
 Tiles" modular  
 wall system. The  
 scalelike tiles  
 fold together,  
 making it easy to  
 reconfigure the  
 space as  
 necessary.

→→  
 OPPOSITE, TOP  
 TO BOTTOM:  
**Alcove loveseat**  
 2007, *Vitra*  
 The brothers' fasci-  
 nation with en-  
 closed spaces is  
 reflected in their  
 "Alcove" collec-  
 tion of chairs and  
 sofas; high backs  
 and sides create  
 an intimate nest.  
**Pebbles 2008,**  
*Tectona*  
 Designed for  
 outdoors, the  
 concave disks  
 comprising the  
 woven-resin  
 "Pebble" col-  
 lection blend  
 naturally into the  
 landscape.

ie served them then,  
 lone so ever since.  
 to Miyake's A-POC  
 where the wearer  
 of cloth to fit her  
 Bouroullecs' furniture  
 be customized by the  
 "Zip" carpet has dif-  
 ferred strips that can be  
 any sequence, their  
 chair" has an adjustable headrest like a car's, and their  
 ice system allows for a myriad of workplace configura-  
 nes," one of their more recent creations for the Galerie  
 ighting system that lets the user slide spotlights vertically  
 tally along leather-sheathed cords. (The Italian lighting  
 'olos is now producing an industrial version.)  
 others started collaborating with Kreo, Didier and  
 Krzentowski's gallery devoted to design exploration, soon  
 ned in 1999. It offered the perfect playground, allowing  
 sign without industrial constraints. "Everything they do is  
 Didier Krzentowski. "From the beginning, their signature

**Money doesn't drive them.  
 Last year they spent much of their  
 time developing a small wooden  
 chair for a family-owned company  
 that specializes in high-quality  
 craftsmanship.**



was different from anything on the market. They were already  
 thinking in terms of 'architecturing' interiors with creations like little  
 houses." Their first exhibition for the gallery, in 2001, included "Ca-  
 bane," wool-covered strips woven together to resemble an open hut  
 large enough to shelter a chair and a sofa, and "Parasol Lumineux,"  
 an oversized square lamp that looks like a beach umbrella. Many of  
 these designs seem less revolutionary today than when the Bouroullecs  
 created them, simply because they've since been so widely emulated.  
 In 2002, the gallery produced the limited-edition "Lit Clos," a  
 semi-enclosed bed raised on four legs like a tree house. It is one  
 of several creations that obliquely reference their childhood in



Brittany—the traditional Breton bed is a raised wooden box. Made of painted plywood, steel and aluminum, it can be put together and taken apart as easily as IKEA furniture. But the similarity ends there: In 2006, a “Lit Clos” sold at auction in New York for \$96,000.

**T**HE DUO WORKS WITH A HANDFUL OF companies and turns down many others. Their freedom is non-negotiable; they take their time and do only what they want. One reason they can stay independent is that they have a small atelier with no more than seven employees. Another is that they generally refuse interior decoration projects. Instead they create objects that generate a constant stream of income through royalties. But money doesn't drive them. Last year they chose to spend much of their time developing a small wooden chair, “Osso,” for Mattiazzi, a family-owned Italian company that specializes in high-quality craftsmanship. “Financially this probably wasn't the most intelligent choice, but being a small operation, we have the flexibility to tackle projects that interest us, and to do it in an obsessive way,” says Ronan.

“Many designers have a Coca-Cola policy. The Bouroullecs are more Dom Pérignon or Krug.” So says Michel Roset, co-owner of Ligne Roset, a family-run multinational and the only French company the brothers currently count among their clients. This fall, Roset's company is releasing “Ploum,” a quilted settee that took more than a year of research. The idea for it occurred one day when Roset and the brothers were talking about the “Togo” sofa by Michel Ducaroy, a company bestseller for the past 30 years. “They decided they'd like to make the equivalent of ‘Togo’ for the 21st century,” recalls Roset.

One of Togo's most attractive features is its extreme comfort, so the Bouroullecs knew they would have to make a couch you would never want to climb out of. The cover is a single piece of fabric—thick, quilted and elastic in two directions. The foam underneath is remarkably soft yet resilient, springing back when you stand up. Together they form a complicated sandwich nearly a foot thick. “When you sit on the couch, you're really in a kind of nest,” says Roset. Because it's one piece, the couch moves with you whenever you change position. Aesthetically, the brothers compare it to a piece of ripe fruit, and indeed the red one looks like an overgrown strawberry. Earlier this year, “Ploum” won a red dot award, an honor reserved for “the best of the best” in product design.

The last time they received this prestigious award was in 2008, for “Worknest,” an ingenious office chair for Vitra. The Swiss brand is their most important industrial collaborator, the rare company that encourages innovation without imposing briefs or deadlines. Vitra's CEO, Rolf Fehlbaum, caught wind of “Disintegrated Kitchen” in the late 1990s and subsequently hired the brothers to design an office system, something they had never done before. They experimented for a good two years before releasing “Joyn” in 2002. At the heart of “Joyn” is a communal table, much like a farm table. It's a blank slate where each individual in the group can customize his space with

dividers, pencil holders, a tray for coffee and so on.

“Joyn” sold extremely well and led to “Alcove” in 2007, a sofa with an extra-high back and sides. While “Joyn” permitted an office full of people to work together without getting on each other's nerves, “Alcove” gave them a place to retreat to when they needed to be alone. According to Anniina Koivu, the one-time journalist who now works as PR Director for Vitra, “This idea of creating a room-within-a-room with a sofa, that was a huge innovation in the market. Of course now we see many similar sofas and boxes and lounges and islands; they've become rather common. But it was ‘Alcove’ that triggered that.” The piece has become one of the brothers' all-time best-sellers. Even Erwan, who (like his brother) lives with little of his own furniture, has an “Alcove” sofa at home.

Their next important undertaking will be at the Château de Versailles, where they recently won a competition to design lighting for the Escalier Gabriel, a staircase whose construction was interrupted in the 18th century and completed in 1985. Their first sketches are due this fall. But this project poses a whole new set of challenges for them. As Erwan explains, “We like the idea that design is something that's not anchored somewhere, that it can go anywhere, that you don't know what it will become. That gives us the freedom to fantasize and experiment. But Versailles... that's something else. Versailles is going to be around for a long time.”

And so, of course, will they. f

*“Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, Bivouac” runs from October 7, 2011, through July 30, 2012, at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, 1 parvis des Droits-de-l'Homme, Metz. Tel. 33/3-87-15-39-39; centrepompidou-metz.fr. An iPad app to accompany the exhibition is in the works; possible successive venues are currently being discussed.*

