

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Twenty-eight
creatives share
career-defining
insights

FRAME

From learning to sew to discovering American design: the **BOUROULLEC** brothers reflect on the encounters and influences that shaped their collaborative careers

WORDS
Melanie Mendelewitsch

PORTRAITS
Valentin Fougeray



RONAN AND ERWAN BOURoulLEC

1971
Ronan Bouroullec born in Quimper, Brittany, France

1976
Erwan Bouroullec born in Quimper, Brittany, France

1997
Spotted by Cappellini and commissioned for their first industrial-design projects

1999
Begin working together in Paris

2001
Hold first solo show at Galerie Kreo
Meet Rolf Fehlbaum, president of Vitra, and work on new office system Joyn

2002
Stage the 'Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec' exhibition at London's Design Museum

2003
Publish their first monograph with Phaidon

2011
Mount the 'Bivouac' exhibition at Centre Pompidou Metz and Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art

2013
Hold 'Momentané' exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris
Unveil the Gabriel Chandelier, the first permanent contemporary piece installed in the Palace of Versailles

2015
Present '17 Screens' installation at Tel Aviv Museum of Art
Release Serif TV for Samsung

RONAN: 'Our grandparents were farmers from northern Finistère. DIY – home improvements and repairs – was part of their daily routine. Our parents weren't into manual labour, but they taught us a lot about things like making repairs and gardening. Ever since we were young, we've been tinkering away – it's something we taught ourselves to do.'

ERWAN: 'Ronan originally studied applied arts – first at Olivier de Serres [École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d'Arts] and then at Ensad [École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs]. Given our family background, it was easier to study design than to go to art school. It was a more recognized discipline, which had a clear purpose, while art was not as easy for some family members to understand. A few years later I went on to study fine arts at Cergy-Pontoise.'

'There are few women with whom we've developed products; engineers are most often men. When it comes to *textile*-related techniques, though, there are generally many female engineers, prototypers and so on. This echoes our family background: our father would look at a project from a structural perspective – he was doing heavy physical work with materials like wood and metal – whereas our mother taught us sewing and finer handicrafts. Women and men have a different approach to making, and I personally love the subtlety of the feminine way. It's linked with a better ability to concentrate.'

RONAN: 'Our four-handed approach began after we joined forces in 1999. Our relationship has evolved over the course of various projects. We've developed a greater maturity in our work. We've also managed to establish some sort of freedom. We used to confer and analyse our designs at every step of the way. Nowadays we work more independently, allowing things to grow before questioning ourselves.'

'We currently have a team of ten in our workshop. Erwan and I facilitate projects in much the same way as a conductor directs an orchestra. When one of us is hesitant about doing a project, that moment of doubt may lead to a more critical examination. Techniques and constraints

are reassuring and form guidelines of sorts, but these are parameters that concern the maker rather than the user. Sometimes one of us is very much inside the project while the other maintains some distance, which allows him to see more clearly, because he doesn't get confused by the details.'

ERWAN: 'The real challenge of design is to learn how to distance oneself while maintaining control. The fact that we're a duo brings an almost schizophrenic dimension to our work.'

'We learned a lot from Giulio Cappellini. He's one of the first people who really listened to us and entrusted us with projects. I'm inspired by his intuition and by the way he's wrapped himself up in the Italian industry while maintaining a bold vision. He once told us that he never has bestsellers but *long* sellers. Many of his products weren't quick to sell but would find their "customer" later and establish themselves over a longer period. We've never forgotten this example.'

'Rolf Fehlbaum of Vitra also taught us a lot. In a way, you could compare him to a football coach; he helped us to improve and develop. When we started working together, he asked us to conceive office furniture, even though we'd never worked in a large office before. We were able to research an unfamiliar environment with an almost naive state of mind. As soon as we completed Joyn, our first product for Vitra, Rolf emphasized the need to maintain ingenuity. We continually try to follow his advice and keep a certain "unprofessionalism" and naivety in our practice. Everyone at our studio is young; it's often their first job.'

'Prototypers, technicians and engineers have taught me a lot – but you have to collaborate with them in a subtle way. Some of them can be reluctant to oppose our vision or to tell us what they *really* think. They can be closed off and hard to move. I recently understood the need to envision a part of our work as a harvest of knowledge, techniques and flavours. If we can't hear or broaden a technician's opinions, the "harvest" idea is lost. There are many ways to do this, but simple handmade prototypes



ALCOVE CABIN XTRA HIGH THREE-SEATER FOR VITRA, 2006-08.



and sketches often open up the discussion more than technical documents or 3D models can do.'

'It's impossible to work without an awareness of history. The older we get, the more we see design as a Darwinian phenomenon.'

'Because I studied fine arts, real design influences came to me later on. In a way, I have a polar view of design. I was impressed by the Americans, who had a joyful and positive way of addressing the largest audience through industrial production. Examples are Hans and Florence Knoll, George Nelson, Eero Saarinen and, of course, Charles and Ray Eames. Their work was typical of the American optimism of the '60s. Italian designers came later: Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini, Andrea Branzi and so on. Their punk approach was a real provocation against bourgeois common sense.'

RONAN: 'We're fascinated by the structure of vegetation. The organic – the logic and performance of the living – is so compelling. Plants often provide inspiration for structural research, although the results never try to mimic nature. But sometimes we seek some sort of opposition to constructed space – to the flat, orthogonal, monochromatic environment. We look for an almost animistic presence.'

ERWAN: 'The French culture was not quite ready for the emergence of design as a practice. It remains very marked by the *meuble de style*, and for many design is just another contemporary "style" French manufacturers and craftsmen have begun to understand the purpose of designers and to see designers as people who conceive products with and for them. We're facing quite a terrifying no-man's-land here. In places like Italy and the Nordic countries, however, design is inherently part of the culture.'

'The fundamental role of design is to give shape to culture. When you visit a museum devoted to ancient civilization, design – more specifically: the shape of everyday tools, weapons, jewellery and the like – is often the only thing that remains. Being able to stand the test of time



ABOVE CPH CHAIR FOR HAY, 2012.

STEELWOOD CHAIR FOR MAGIS, 2007.

OPPOSITE PAGE 'MOMENTANÉ' AT THE MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, PARIS, FRANCE, 2013.



**'THE OLDER
WE GET,
THE MORE
WE SEE
DESIGN AS A
DARWINIAN
STRUGGLE'**

means that those tools are technically perfect and were useful, but on top of that you see the people *behind* them. You see their humanity and can determine, therefore, the shape of their culture.'

'The challenge is to re-establish a common understanding between manufacturers and users, as these two parties are becoming increasingly detached from each other.'

'Most of the companies we work with share a 1970s vision. It's home-oriented, based on sustainable domestic environments that barely change. When it comes to ecology, the idea of indestructible pieces of furniture that will last forever is essential. We don't want our objects to grow old or to be tied to a particular time period. The design of the '90s focused on screaming about deep change and a new aesthetic: a conception that gave birth to noisy objects that were too specific to age in harmony.'

'Alcove, a sofa for Vitra [2006-08], is one of our most successful projects, because it goes beyond the idea of a simple piece of furniture; it also organizes space. Alcove is the best summary of our Lit Clos [a sleeping cabin manufactured by Cappellini in 2000]; the concept is almost the same. But Lit Clos didn't sell at the time.'

'In our opinion, design can be shown in galleries, too. The gallery is an interesting place to remove oneself from the extremely rational framework of industrial production, to look for new paths or simply to express approaches that are too radical for large-scale production. Of course, since we're in a time of hyper velocity and the "starification" of designers, the legitimacy of the gallery can be questioned. In our case, though, we feel that the gallery is a necessary place to work – it goes hand in hand with the more traditional practice of product design.'

'For us, art feels like a surgical operation. Design, on the other hand, is akin to a form of homeopathy.'

OPPOSITE PAGE NUAGE CANOPY AT
PASEO PONTI, MIAMI, USA, 2017.