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Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi of Formafantasma, stood among the studio's Turkish Red project

# Prima Materia by Studio Formafantasma

's-Hertogenbosch

18 February 2014

In the 1990s Dutch conceptual design was dominated by Droog, a collective of designers who prized unorthodox functions and unusual combinations of materials and techniques. It represented a new route to market for experimental work and a new outlet for a generation of Dutch designers.

Growing out of that tradition is the work of contemporary designers such as Wieki Somers and Maarten Baas, people whose work is informed by extensive research and which often draws on the history of design and craft for inspiration. Among the most interesting current practitioners within this strand of design is Studio Formafantasma, an Eindhoven-based studio that is a collaboration between Italian designers Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin.

Formafantasma – which was founded by Trimarchi and Farresin following their graduation from Design Academy Eindhoven in 2009 – specialises in work that is heavily research-based and which frequently steers into the realms of social critique. Its projects always result in finished objects, but these objects are typically non-commercial, serving instead as meditations on themes such as historical production methods, the development of culture and the social significance of folk craft. The studio's work is dominated by reflections on the past.

The studio and its work is currently the subject of an exhibition at The Stedelijk Museum in Den Bosch, the first time that all of Formafantasma's work has been exhibited in one place. To mark the occasion, Disegno spoke to Simone Farresin, who touched upon the curation of the exhibition, the state of design in the Netherlands, and how the studio positions its work.

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## **The exhibition contains a number of previous projects. Is it a straight retrospective?**

Basically, but our studio only started working four or five years ago, so calling it a retrospective is a bit difficult. I don't know how else to put it, but let's say that we're really enthusiastic about the opportunity, because we've never actually seen our work together.

## **What opportunities did that present in the curation?**

When you enter there's a corridor or room that doesn't contain our work, but is showing material connected to the work. It's not a "making of", but it's showing images, mockups and material samples that we collected to get to the work. It's also showing movies downloaded from Youtube that show the implications of the work. You go through all these collages, and don't particularly understand where one work begins and another ends. It's a little like thought with no boundaries, so similar to moving through our heads before you see the work. Then the next section of the exhibition shows the finished work.

**But that initial section isn't showing direct research?**

To give you an example, we have a collage of *Autarchy* and *Botanica* that blurs the two together. Both of those are about a kind of do-it-yourself process, sharing information, and communities. *Autarchy* is really about a utopian, rural community that is meeting together and appropriating production again in a really simple way with simple materials. Accompanying that we have movies from Youtube. One is how to make bread; the second is how to make plastic; the third is how to make a bomb; and the fourth is how to make an army. So they're showing what the implications are of what was in our mind when we started those projects. Our work is never metaphorical, but it can be allegorical and that's shown very bluntly in this section of the exhibition.

**Yours is a very research-led practice and one that places a huge amount of emphasis on the context surrounding a project. Is that corridor section of the exhibition emphasising that approach?**

Yes, but a lot of exhibitions nowadays are about the making. This is not about the making, it's about the links between different things that are going on in our works. So *Moulding Tradition* is about migration flows and the complexity of national identity. That is deconstructed in this section, so you have documents about Italian colonialism and migration between North Africa and Italy. You see less about the materiality. The exhibition's name includes *Materia*, but instead of focusing on materiality, we wanted to talk about the historical components in our work and its different layers.

**In terms of that, how would a very material led-project like *Charcoal* begin? Would you start from an interest in the material, or an interest in a specific form of production like charcoal burning?**

Both. We look into the properties of a material and from that we start to look at the history of a material. When we were on that project we were looking at the fact that people have a certain nostalgia for traditional things and techniques. But charcoal burning is a traditional technique that we shouldn't be nostalgic for. It led to big problems of deforestation in Europe and it's still causing problems in places like the Congo. The finished objects from that project were all about the purification of water and well being, but the corridor is showing material connected to this other side of the process and research.

**Why do you have such an interest in history? It's present in nearly all of your projects.**

It's from thinking about what's going on in the world. So we have *Turkish Red* in the exhibition, which is examining the history of red as a colour and how its materiality is so much embedded in the history and development of countries. That's what we're interested in when we look back. Design is too much a discipline that is always looking forward to futures that may not come. It's a bit like *Brazilia* if you know what I mean. Our work is much more about wondering how we link to the past and what influence development of our own cultures and society has had.

**Would you ally your work to the output of the Design Interactions MA at the Royal College? That course shares an emphasis on context and awareness of how design affects society.**

I think there is that link and I see that course's approach in a way is similar. But I think Design Interactions is very linked to science and biotechnologies. It is quite specific in a way and in that sense our work is not related to those areas. There is a link, but I think we're interested in different fields.

**This exhibition is one of your first major showcases in the Netherlands. Why don't you exhibit there more?**

The Netherlands is a great context for design, but compared to how important design is becoming in the Netherlands, there are no major museums dedicated to design. There are not really a lot of design galleries. Educationally, the Netherlands is fantastic, but it's an interesting context – even the design week is really young.

**What about the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam? That's beginning a programme of design exhibitions.**

I think we have to wait and see. In Amsterdam the Rijksmuseum and Stedelijk were both closed for so long. We'll have to see in the next few years how much they will participate in the design world. I think the Boijmans often does interesting things, but that's on a different scale. But it's important for us to show in the Netherlands. It's where we studied, where we live and work. But we're still Italian designers based in the Netherlands and I think that can create some tensions or wonderings about who we are and what we do. Our way of doing conceptual design is different to what Droog for instance was doing in the 1990s. I think people are still coming to understand our work.

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**RETURN TO HOMEPAGE**

**INTERVIEW Oli Stratford, editor of *Disegno Daily***

**Prima Materia is on at the The Stedelijk Museum in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands until 15 June**

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