

Onomatopee 50.2

THIS SECOND EDITION OF THE NEST SERIES AGAIN FEATURES A RELEVANT VOICE FROM THE EINDHOVEN REGION. EACH NEST PROJECT ARTICULATES THE SPECIFIC QUALITIES OF SELECTED CULTURAL PRODUCERS VIA AN EXHIBITION AT THE ONOMATOPEE-PROJECT-SPACE, A PUBLICATION WITH IN-DEPTH TEXTS AND AN ARTIST TALK/BOOK-LAUNCH.

Nest#3

THE MAN WHO SEEKS

LUCAS MAASSEN'S WORK BELONGS
IN THE GALLERY, NOT IN THE SHOP.
WHICH MEANS IT HAS PLENTY TO SAY
ABOUT COMMERCIAL DESIGN TODAY.
AND, IN ONE CASE, MAASSEN'S WORK
SAYS SO OUT LOUD.

by Shonquis Moreno

¹Singing Chair
They talk back to you
2010, p.36

²Sitting Chairs
Installation of 14 chairs
in various positions
2003, p.32

³Yoga Chairs
Installation of 5 chairs in
different yoga positions
2008, p.34

⁴Sitting Chairs XXL
Concept illustration
Giant Sitting Chairs
2008, p.32

It's name is the Singing Chair¹.

The Singing Chair comments on its viewer instead of the viewer commenting on the chair, like an actor who suddenly begins to discuss the performance of his audience. It has a blocky form, with thick legs and an LCD screen embedded in the backrest that displays the video of a faceless mouth. An in-built sensor allows it to snap vociferously to life when someone walks past. The point? There are so many chairs that they can do everything, even talk – or sit around: Maassen's multi-scale Sitting Chairs², render the sitter superfluous. Included in the 2008 MoMA New York exhibition Design and the Elastic Mind, they almost suggest a liberation of that poor workhorse of design: Free the chair! Shorten the work-week of the common chair! Maassen made the Sitting Chair following the birth of his first child, when he began to experiment with size and proportions. In these numbers, he seems to say, they are so redundant that they have nothing else to do but lounge around on themselves. "You can sit on it," Maassen says, "but it's not made to be sat on; it's just an object. It's totally useless because the chair becomes the user of the chair." It's designed; it's just design that cuts out that noisome functionality bit.

Not quite as dysfunctional are the Yoga Chairs³, which were a formal exercise for the designer, quite literally. These variously scaled pieces are captured in the midst of poses like halasana, upa vista konasana and setu bandhasana. The sofa is doing the Chinese splits, others make love in acrobatic positions. Maassen has even modeled "a really big one, an enormous King Kong version⁴" in 3D Max atop the Empire State Building in New York City, which he would like to see built one day.

Maassen asks the basics that we have not answered without quite answering them: What is real and what is not? What is design and what is not? When is a chair a chair and when is it not? When it assumes a person-ality? When it chats? When it takes a load off? What is a designer's job anyway?

Eindhoven-based Maassen, who graduated from the local Design Academy and worked in the studios of Piet Hein Eek

and Barbara Visser, is full of questions. Today, his clients include the Netherlands Architecture Institute, Paris' Grand Palais, Philips and Droog, for whom Maassen is not a designer of products, per se; he is, rather, a designer of fresh perspectives, which sometimes means situations in which the confusion is clarifying.

While studying in the Man and Living department at the Design Academy Eindhoven, Maassen began to experiment with the manufacture, not of objects, but of context. He once manipulated the stories contained in two books, for instance, to create a third. He did this by copying a half-page text from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, changing the pronoun "I" into "you." After generating multiple studies to make it difficult to discern one text from the other, he glued the Calvino onto a half-empty page and into the binding of Georges Perec's *Sleepwalker*⁵. The effect was to lead Perec's main character, (identified, in a way reminiscent of Calvino, as only *The Man Who Sleeps*) out the front door of his parents' Paris house and into the stultifying sameness of Trude, one of Calvino's cities. At the same time, he led readers into a hybrid and serendipitously discovered narrative "environment" of his own design.

More recently and somewhat incidentally, technology has been providing fresh narratives for Maassen's work. Technology, which the designer describes as "an ever updating tool set," may influence the process or the shape of a product, but it invariably serves the concept, not the other way around.

The Brainwave Sofa⁶ is a fine example. Maassen wore an electrode-studded cap to record the alpha waves produced via an electroencephalogram (EEG) while he watched the readout of it on a screen. With designer Dries Verbruggen of Unfold, he translated a three-second segment of the 3D image this generated into the structure of an undulating, CNC-milled, felt upholstered sofa. Its width corresponds to the wave frequencies measured in hertz, while the length of the couch represents the time axis. Seated in its center, then, the sitter is situated between the first and second seconds of Maassen's thought. The strength

of the signal is represented by the height of each bump in the seat and, in the troughs between waves, the piece is tufted and buttoned – a touch of humor that is often built into Maassen's work. In the end, then, Brainwave was shaped by the designer looking at an image of what he was thinking, which, in its turn, influenced what he was thinking. Still with me?

Maassen prefers these conceptual investigations to the commercial, which certainly doesn't answer the question, How does a good designer make a good living? (Then again, no one has answered that yet.) A good illustration of this is his Script furniture⁷, which was, ironically, the result of an effort to produce a more reproducible (if not widely sellable) product. The Script pieces' rawness and regularly perforated surfaces recall the industrial elegance of Jean Prouvé's 1950 modular *Maison Tropicale* prototype. But they confound the industrial and the analog with the digital: Maassen has written a software script to guide designers who want to make a (hardware) Script chair of their own. The script he provides, however, lacks specificity, which is precisely his point. Take the line in the script that reads:⁸

⁷Script Furniture
Post-digital Furniture series
2009, p.24

⁸excerpt from script

3. position = "optimal" function
"CCA" **(--a.Construction--
b.Comfort-- c.Aesthetics--)**

Without dictating the details, he indicates that while assembling the components, the designer must pay attention to: a. the construction b. comfort and c. aesthetics. It is a guide that nonetheless leaves room for maneuver. "This is the open source aspect of the script," Maassen says. "What does technology bring to design and what do designers need to be careful of while using technology to make design?"

A precursor to the Script furniture was the OS chair⁹ commissioned by curator and designer Thomas Lommée for an exhibit at the Z33 gallery in Hasselt. Lommée wanted a chair that would fit into the loose strictures of his open-source, online, Meccano-like furniture and product design project called Open Structures. "In these two chairs," says Lommée, "Lucas applied two different 'design scripts' – the OS script and the Script script – to the same object, generating two similar but different results. The idea that a script or a system, rather than human creativity, is generating the design is interesting and is revisited in other projects he's done."

⁹Script Chair OS
Script Chair for
'Open Structures' system
2009, p.23

⁵Sleepwalker
They talk back to you
2003, p.52

⁶Brainwave Sofa
Sofa by brainwave
2009, p.46

¹⁰**3D-MC1**
Virtual Chair
2007, p.42

¹¹**Nano Chair**
Sitting Chair XS
2008, p.14

¹¹**Nano Chair 2.0 XXS**
World's smallest chair
2009, p.17

The 3D-MC1 chair¹⁰, which doesn't even exist physically, is also a response to, and a toying with, a system. Maassen has maintained a carpenter's workspace on Second Life since 2007. When he began to embrace the limitations – the lack of gravity, the irrelevance of comfort – of this virtual space as liberations instead, he was able to design furniture that disregards the physics by which real furniture is bound. The result is Model Chair 1, which he put on his website for use by other designers on websites, in presentations or inside Second Life. For the Grand Palais, he even filmed a choreographed dance for the two detached sections of the chair and set it to the Strauss Waltz. This meant that Maassen designed a virtual chair and then built a physical version that he recorded, thereby creating what he calls a “semi-virtual” version.

This overlap of the virtual and the real also occurred in the design of the Nano Chairs¹¹. These little guys seem “virtual” to viewers because they can't be seen without the aid of a digital microscope, but they do actually exist: gloopy accretions of hardened liquid platinum, at the diminutive size of only 3 and 5 microns. Maassen used a 3D interface to work at the nano scale, building his seating up from layers of liquid that hardened as he deposited them, slightly deforming the layers beneath. “The thing that fascinates me most,” the designer confesses, “is that, as opposed to virtual reality in which unreal objects look real, these nano objects are physically real but seem virtual.”

So when Maassen, under the name Perec, tries to sell doll-house chairs that seem to be life-size on eBay, when he makes chairs that chat, chairs that loaf idly, chairs that can't be seen and chairs that aren't really there, are these provocations? He doesn't intend them to be. But they should be. “A lot of design is pollution, not only material pollution, but visual as well. You can't provoke someone by making a nano-chair,” Maassen says. “It's more annoying to produce hundreds of thousands of chairs.” So what are you going to do about it?



¹ p.36



² p.46



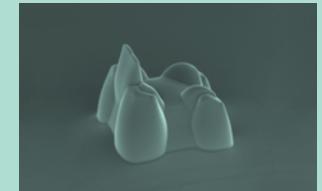
⁴ p.38



³ p.35



¹⁰ p.42



¹¹ p.17



¹¹ p.14



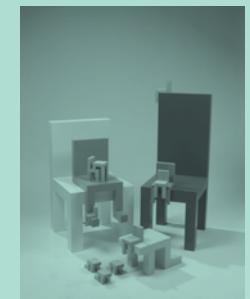
⁹ p.22



⁷ p.25



⁵ p.52



² p.32