

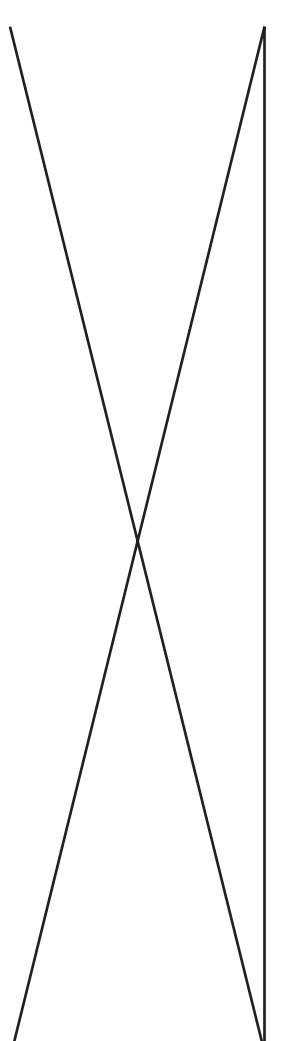
ARTISTS SPACE

Local River

Mathieu Lehannour
in collaboration with
Anthony van den Bossche

April 26 - June 21, 2008
Curated by Alexandra Midal

Architecture & Design
Project Space



Cry Me a Local River

by Alexandra Midal

One could trace Mathieu Lehanneur's career solely through his curative interventions on domestic settings via the household apparatuses he began developing in 2001. Whether Lehanneur exhumes outmoded therapies or amplifies existing processes, the mediation displayed by his projects plays on the physical and intellectual dimensions of his subjects by regulating the body, and on their mechanic-organic coupling by controlling the environment. By elaborating efficient systems that readjust the possible fickle quotidian disruptions—such as the decrease of oxygen at home during certain hours of the day, or fatigue, or even noise—Lehanneur modifies design's positivist impulse and assigns to it a new range of experience. With *Local River* his project for Artists Space, he goes a step further.

We are accustomed to cinema staging dysfunctional habitats, as in Victor Sjöström's *The Wind*, Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green*, Todd Haynes' *Safe*, or Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. Noxious, interspersed with miasmas, polluted, and dangerous, the sick-house is also depicted in literature. It can be found not only in horror novels, but also in science fiction stories, as in James G. Ballard's psychotropic house, racked by convulsions and willfully murderous.¹ Pathologies and household contaminations haunt us. While not reaching such extremes, contemporary dwellings have unsurprisingly become the source of diseases like lead poisoning, and numerous household products have become prohibited...

Design emerged during a trend favoring the socio-medical rehabilitation of the habitat through decoration. Think of William Morris's work—which dreams of society salvaging reform through design and makes use of the characteristic vocabulary of disease, using *ad libitum* the terms "remedy," "ailment," and even "rot"—or Docteur Cazalis, a renowned hygienist and eugenicist who tackled the spread of syphilis and forced Parisians to take draconian measures in the fields of public health and decoration so as to purify the nation: "Not enough is done with affordable housing, we also want it to have affordable decoration and furnishings, and we want this decoration to be bright, likeable, and these furnishings to be solid, with simple shapes and excellent taste."² Too, we must not omit Le Corbusier, who in 1925 advocated the use of white-wash to cleanse the "impurity" of decorative arts. This is the reason for which he enacted the *Ripolin Law*: "All citizens must replace their draperies, damask cloth, wallpaper, stencils, with a layer of pure white Ripolin,"³ before adding: "Whitewash is absolute, everything stands out against it, inscribes itself completely on it, black on white: it's straightforward and honest. Place on it dirty objects or errors in taste: they are blindingly obvious. It is a bit like beauty's X-rays. It is a criminal court that is constantly in session. It is the eye of Truth."⁴ A plethora of such examples exists. How can one not analyze the metal tubing used by Mart Stam, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, or Marcel Breuer otherwise, or consider the Streamline of the thirties and forties, that "bad design," according to Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s time-honored expression? But this is not about listing so many manifestations. Each one underlines the founding link that unites design to the human right of a dwelling that guarantees a healthy existence. And if we agree to consider the house as the incarnation *par excellence* of hypochondria, Lehanneur, whose work is frequently associated with healthcare, could engender his production from the standpoint of the domestic sanatorium.

With *Local River*—the latest born of the family, specially conceived for the Architecture & Design Space at Artists Space—Lehanneur offers a project that concludes the cycle he began seven years ago, while pursuing research on pharmacopeia. An aquaponic ecosystem standardized for the home, *Local River* seems, at first sight, to be part of the New York fervor for local food production that is now flourishing on the blackboards of grocery stores and restaurants throughout the city. A kind of aquarium made out of grey glass that combines edible plants, herbs, and fish, *Local River* functions without any contact with the outside world. Its plants filter the water for its fish while the latter's excretions nourish the plants in return. This living room pantry preserves, chilled and in sight, foodstuff that, though still living, is ready to be eaten. Local Food fantasy pushed to its paroxysm: the traceability of the food that fills the plate is under control, but its owner must nonetheless brandish courage and a knife to kill and fix his next meal. Is this design or crime?

Behind *Local River*'s intention, we find a facetious remark by philosopher Vilém Flusser, who took pleasure in rethinking design's etymology as a "trap" and a "design created against nature." He explicated this idea as follows: "Here is an explanation that is likely to sober us. However, it also unconstrains. Indeed, here an admission imposes itself. This test obeys a very specific design: to unveil the insidious and perfidious aspects which the word *design* contains."⁵ Might this "Machiavellian" design—according to Flusser's terminology—be capable of defining the action associated with *Local River*? Absolutely not. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes places side-by-side plastic, the Citroën D.S., and a beefsteak.⁶ He mentions the steak's "strength" and "sickness": "The fad for steak tartar, for instance, is an exorcism process against the romantic association of sensitivity and sickness: there are, in this dish, all of the material's germinating states: the bloody puree and the mucous of the egg, an entire combination of soft and bright substances—some kind of significant compendium of preparituration images." The unappetizing description of raw flesh does not aim to transform us into monsters. And when Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to food in his ethnological essay, placing back-to-back the raw and the cooked, the culinary dimension enables him to map out the fundamental relationships between man with his environment. Hence it is not a coincidence when this same reference concludes an essay by architecture and design critic Reyner Banham. At the conclusion of "The Crisp at the Crossroads,"⁷ Banham undertakes a meticulous examination of the crispy and fragrant potato slice and its wrapper before considering that Lévi-Strauss may have committed a major mistake with his title: "In fact, the more I think about the comparison with porridge, the more I question myself. Could the world's great anthropologist have used the wrong polarities and should he not have written *The Cooked and the Crispy*?"⁸ As a conclusion to these food transitions—from the steak, to the crisp, to *Local River*—we can ask ourselves if Lehanneur, following the example of Lévi-Strauss's savant, "is not the man who furnishes the real answers, he is the once who asks the real questions."⁹ The ecosystem he has placed in the living room enables us to envision the basic relationships that humankind maintains with the world.

¹ James Graham Ballard, *The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista* (1962) in *Vermillion Sands* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971)

² Jean Lahor (Cazalis), *Les Habitations à bon marché et un art nouveau pour le peuple*, (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1905): 50.
³ Surface paint brand. See Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996): 191.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 193.

⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Petite Philosophie du design*, (Paris: Circé, 2002): 11.

⁶ Roland Barthes, "Le bifteck et les frites", in *Mythologies*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, coll. "Points", 1951): 73.

⁷ Reyner Banham, "The Crisp at the Crossroads", *New Society* 16, n° 406, (July 9, 1970): 77.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 77.

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques 1. Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

Local Conversation between Paola Antonelli, Mathieu Lehanneur, and Alexandra Midal

Paola Antonelli: In Mathieu's work, I sense a tension between his desire to conceive seductive objects and an approach to design that takes its cue from human behavior and is meant to ease daily life. This tension is central to my exhibition, *Design and the Elastic Mind*, in which a selection of six projects by Mathieu Lehanneur, *Éléments* (including five projects)¹ and *Bel-Air*, are presented. At the junction of productive interface and innovation design, his approach feeds on collaborations with experts and, following the example of a generation of designers that has caught my attention, he transforms their ideas, making them tangible and effective.

Mathieu Lehanneur: Actually, even when I collaborate—which I do infrequently, for example with Alexandra Midal—the elaboration of my projects does not rely on a wide network of collaborators, which I don't maintain. Rather, I put together hypotheses or scenarios, and in order to validate and enrich them, I call upon the expertise of specialists. However, I could say that I rely similarly on the intelligence of a micro alga, as in the project "O," one of the five *Éléments*, as I would on that of a scientist.

Alexandra Midal: Mathieu invited me to share knowledge, to call upon, on equal terms, theory and practice under the guise of some kind of experiential think-tank. We began with *Éléments*, a family of five apparatuses that borrow from science to inform design. These five devices, as well as the more recent *Bel-Air* (2007), are conceived as antidotes to pollution, found increasingly in both professional and domestic settings, caused by harmful chemicals contained in household products, synthetic fibers, etc.

Mathieu Lehanneur: *Bel-Air* and *Éléments* posit a balance in the relationship between humans and their daily surroundings; they favor a notion of physiological and chemical ergonomics that modifies the domestic environment and its inhabitants. Taken as a whole, these re-search projects deliberately reveal how dangerous the habitat can be.

Alexandra Midal: The specificity of your projects invokes a logic of paranoia, of an "everything is dangerous, all the time" outlook, a feeling of the loss of "Safe," to quote the title of Paola's previous exhibition at MoMA.

Paola Antonelli: I do not believe that one can speak about paranoia. Instead, these objects refer to our existing life conditions. If you pay attention to the way we relate to space, you will notice that we all tend to surround ourselves with objects that are meant to protect us. This situation does not necessarily imply paranoia; it denotes an attention to the everyday.

Mathieu Lehanneur: That is all the more true given that, as with the *Objets thérapeutiques*, the brain is the main ingredient in recovery. These projects consider the individual as part of the treatment. Usually, when one falls sick, treatment involves a physician, a pharmacist, and medication, but the sick individual is somewhat excluded. The point here is to reintegrate the patient in the therapeutic ecosystem.

Paola Antonelli: In this world increasingly depleted of resources, designers like Mathieu attempt to change the trajectory; they confront

reality as a given. I would even say that their practice tends to be poetic and anti-paranoid. Mathieu has created "pets," familiar "animals" that are not frightening in any way.

Alexandra Midal: Paola, a few years ago, in an essay you published, you coined the notion of Existenzmaximum. This term describes the amplification of an environment based on miniaturized technology. Would you describe Mathieu's work using this concept, following this same principle of expansion that also informs an ecosystem's immateriality, as in *Local River*, the project he has designed with Anthony Van den Bossche for Artist Space?

Paola Antonelli: Indeed. His work as a whole stems from this movement that spreads from the inside to the outside. Designers and architects are currently attempting to think through the model of this expansion from the bottom up.

Mathieu Lehanneur: *Local River* echoes the "eat local, drink local" slogans and other "slow food" trends that are appearing everywhere in New York. This consumer concern consists not only of verifying the quality of food, but also in controlling its traceability. These thoughts were the departure point for Anthony and me, to reduce intermediaries and develop a fish, vegetable, and herb ecosystem. The human being intervenes at the end of the food chain.

Alexandra Midal: *Local River* could pass for a revised primitivist myth! However, it is a [functional] household product. This food tank for the living room contains both the main dish, (the fish), and the side order, (vegetables and the herbs). The whole thing recreates a nutrient broth.

Paola Antonelli: It also brings to mind an ideal ecosystem that would predate man, something along the lines of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*.

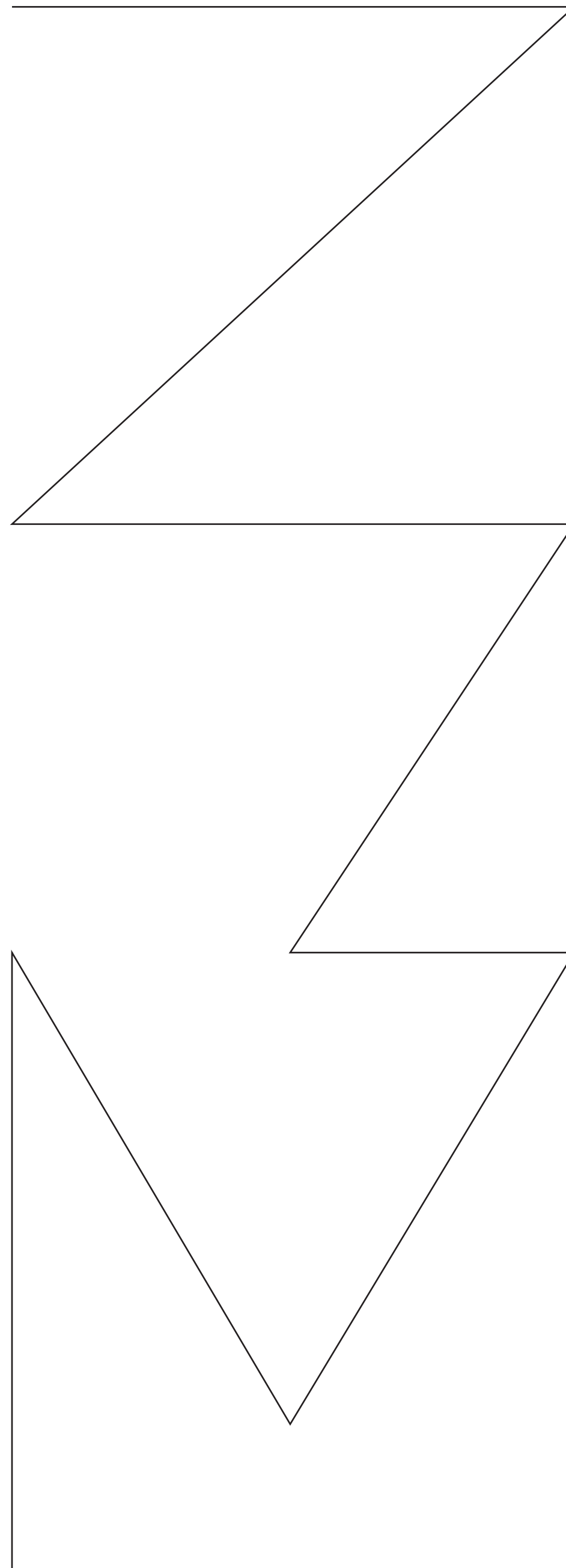
Alexandra Midal: It is true that *Local River* is a disturbing project—we won't dwell here on the dangers of standardized eating! But it is also mischievous and full of humor. Initially, it was going to be inaugurated on the night of the preview with a sushi tasting, including the live slicing of wriggling fish, but such things are easier said than done.

Paola Antonelli: Although this is exactly what happens in the Canal Street fisheries that use farming in their basements.

Mathieu Lehanneur: *Local River* is like a slice of nature, repurposed so as to be brought home. It embodies the dream of complete traceability and absolute control.

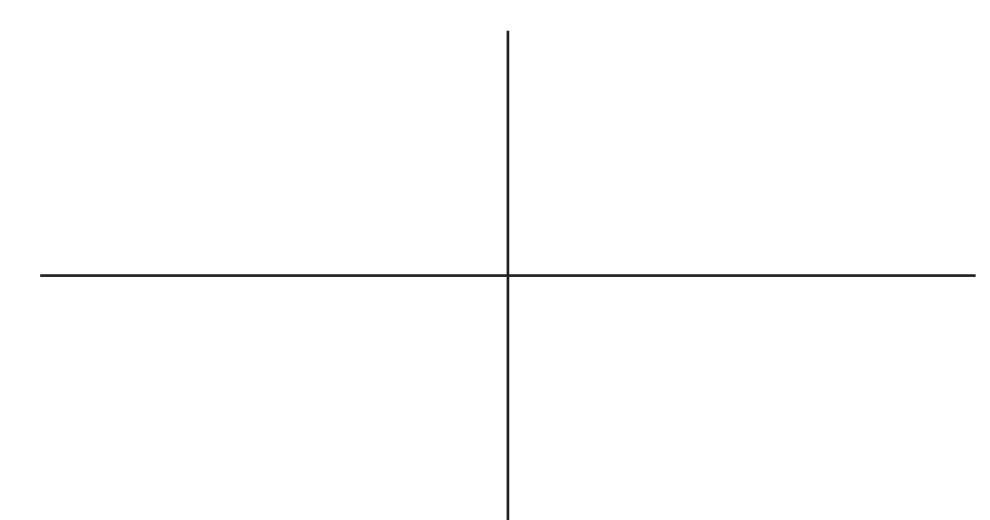
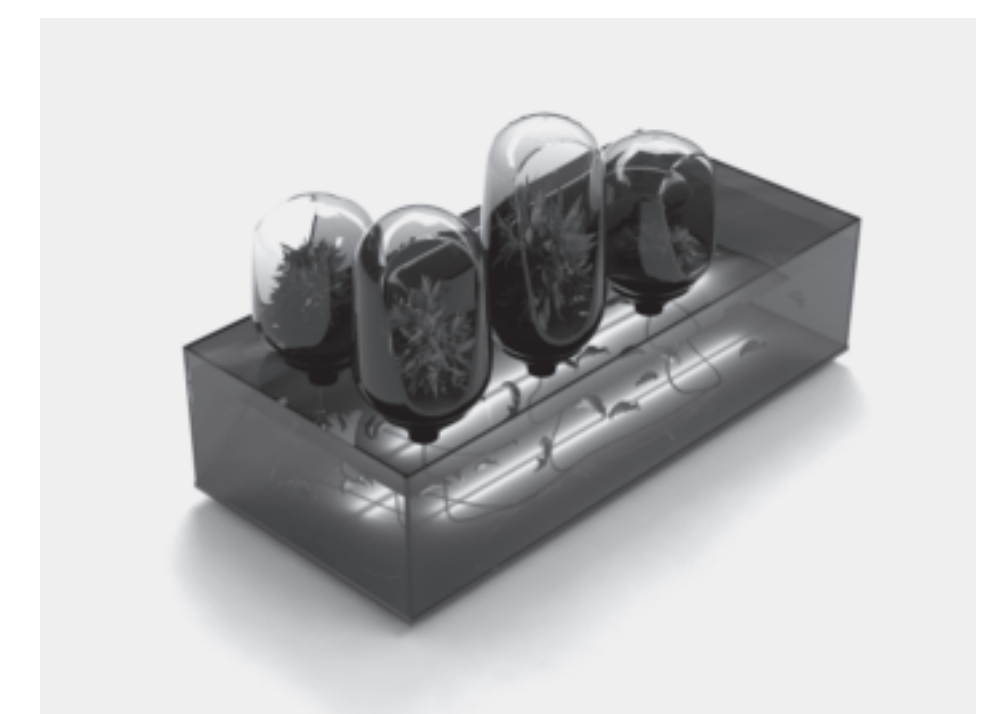
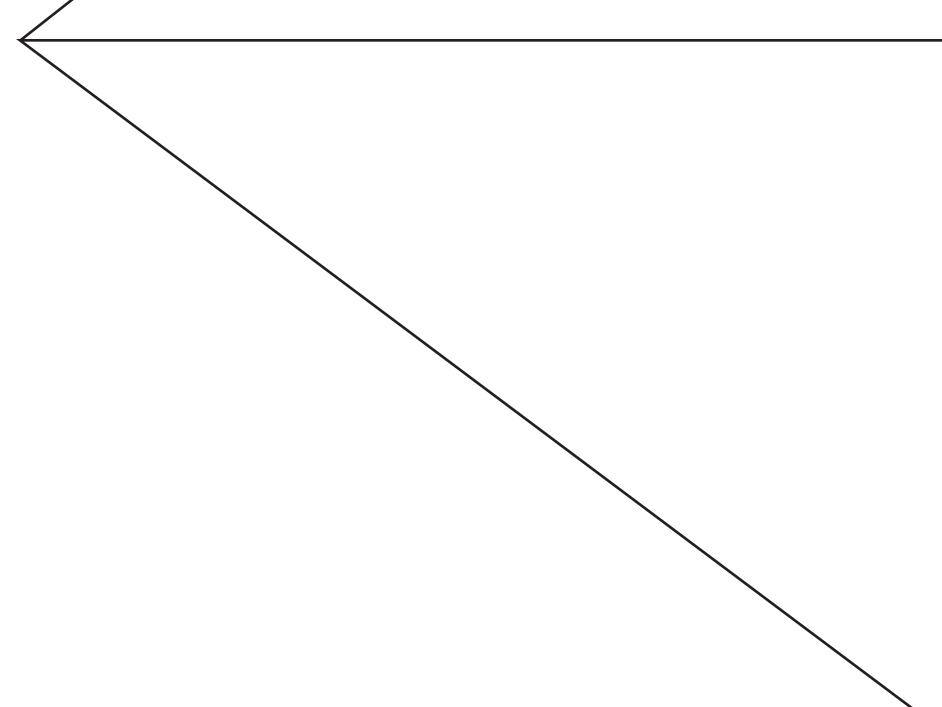
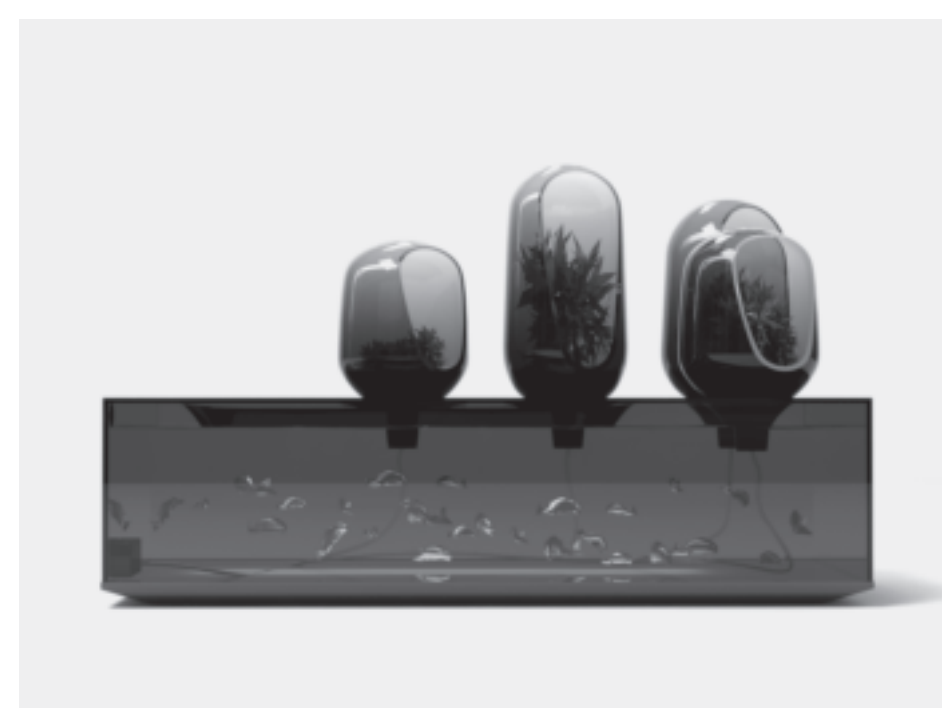
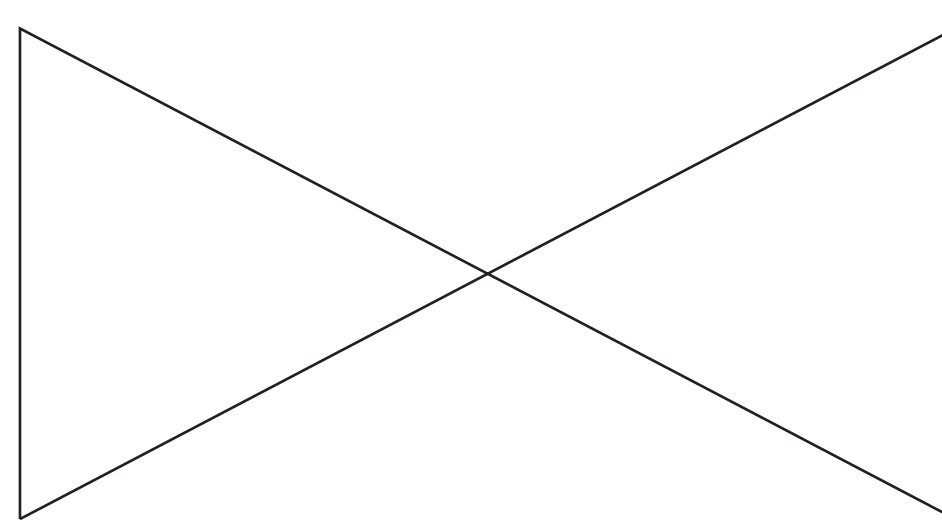
New York, March 2008

¹ Q for Quinton, dB for Decibel, C° for Celsius, O for Oxygen and K for Kelvin activate a single empathetic process and bring their attention on the dwellers' state of imbalance before reacting. For O, it is *Spirulina Platensis*, a green colored microorganism enriched with vitamins that produces an oxygenic photosynthesis. See Alexandra Midal, ed. *Paysages intérieur*, Paris, VIA, 2006.



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www.mathieulehanneur.com