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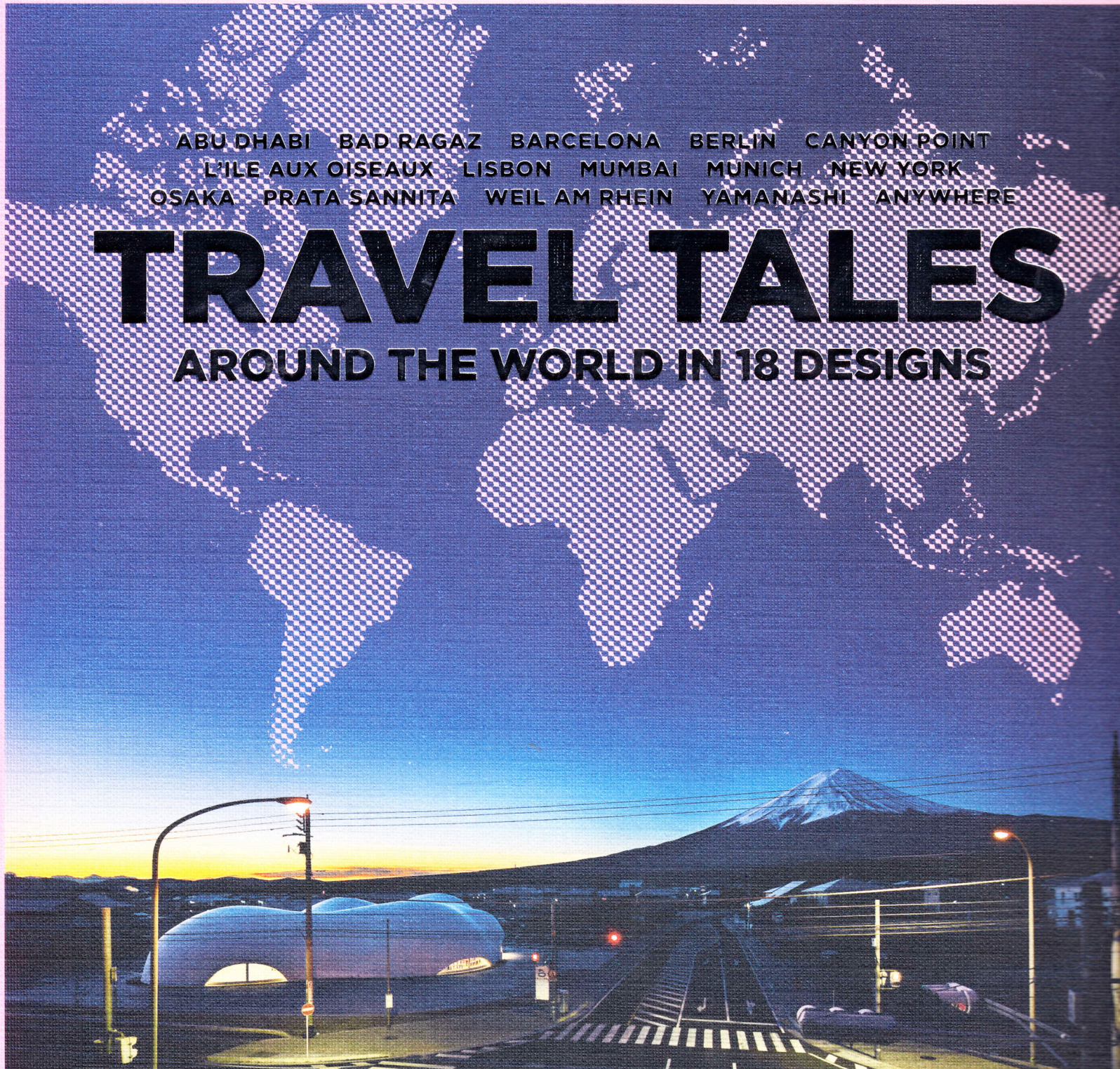
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LIGHT LAB

With the Half Life lamp, JORIS LAARMAN shines his light on a potential future while seemingly sidestepping the moral and ethical issues involved in his latest work.

WORDS FEMKE DE WILD
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JORIS LAARMAN AND FRIEDMAN BENDA, NEW YORK.

It's been some time since we've had news of young Dutch designer Joris Laarman, but visitors to his solo exhibition, which opened this past March at New York City's Friedman Benda Gallery, got a good look at what's been occupying the brain behind the Bone chair for the past few years. According to the press release that accompanied the show, Laarman's new work – which largely embroiders on the idea behind the chair he introduced in 2006 – is meant 'to exhibit a world of new options on the edge of fiction and reality'. Laarman's Half Life lamp, in particular, balances precariously on this very edge.

The small lamp features a rather antiquated-looking lampshade atop a slender pipe and is protected, as befits a real laboratory experiment, by a glass dome. In February of this year, the lampshade was made from viable cells removed from the ovaries of a Chinese hamster in 1957. These cells were kept alive and, in 1990, enriched with the luciferase gene, which makes luminescent creatures such as fireflies glow in the dark. It is this gene that gives the shade of the Half Life lamp its soft glimmer – an irregular emission of light clearly visible under controlled conditions.

Laarman's lamp is a nice example of biomimicry – defined as 'the mimicking of life using imitation biological systems' – an up-and-coming trend in the world of design. Rather than giving a starring role to one or more machines, biomimicry helps designers to find solutions by imitating natural processes. What's interesting about the Half Life lamp is that such processes are not replicated at an early stage and ultimately implemented with the use of machinery – like little robots built to move like insects – but replicated *and* implemented by using an organic material. In designing the Bone chair, Laarman tried to learn from the power of nature; in designing this lamp, he employed nature even more directly. Since the 1990s, we have seen a frenzy of experimentation with

genomics and other life sciences among artists and designers. A well-known example, and one that is relevant to the Half Life lamp, is artist Eduardo Kac's rabbit, Alba. Kac had a green fluorescent gene from a jellyfish implanted in a rabbit in a French laboratory. He wanted to put the animal under a blue light and have it emit a fluorescent green glow. The Alba project caused a scandal, and neither Kac nor the researcher involved was spared. Artists like Kac like to reveal the inner workings of scientific techniques. They like exposing what the general public may not know, debunking certain developments, provoking our sensibilities. If provocation is the task of the artist, then what is the task of the designer who enters the field of genomics?

According to Laarman, research into in vitro products suitable for manufacture can 'lead to a whole new world of objects, products and production methods with new formal languages that have been unknown until now.' He says that 'using the beauty and efficiency of biological growth' might allow us to solve the problem of rapidly vanishing natural resources. Laarman is looking to scientific research for practical applications. Although he presents the lamp – which no longer glows, for that matter, having

been removed from its laboratory environment – in a gallery, he does so from the perspective of the designer. He is displaying the result of scientific research, shining his light on a possible future, experimenting, trying to push the envelope – and, it seems, steering clear of the moral and ethical issues inextricably tied to the cultivation and manipulation of living cells.

It remains the role of the artist to explore not so much whether something *can* be done, but rather whether something *should* be done, and to confront both designer and viewer with such questions. ■■■■

HALF LIFE LAMP

DESIGNER Joris Laarman

MAIN COMPONENTS Glass dome, lamp base, viable cells

DIMENSIONS (H X Ø) 33 x 18.4 cm

EDITION Prototype

GALLERY Friedman Benda, New York

