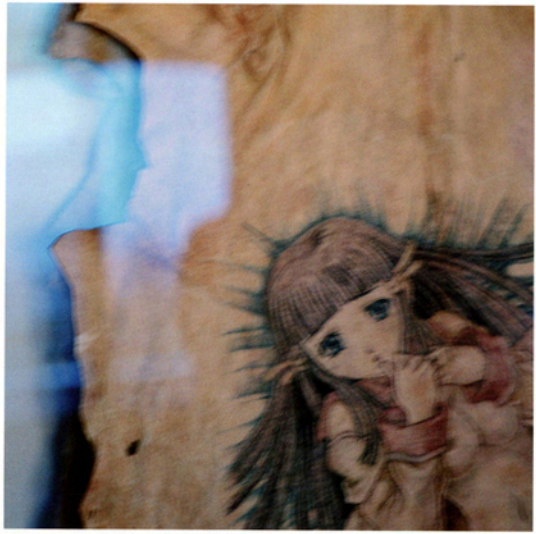
whitewall



THE UNSEEN WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY ART SUMMER 2007



Designer
MARCEL WANDERS
in his Netherlands studio,
holding his "Fishnet" chair

THE PERFORMANCE ARTIST

Larger-than-life designer MARCEL WANDERS burst onto the scene over a decade ago — and he's been shaking things up in the design world ever since.

BY JOSEPHINE MINUTILLO PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK LYON

"OVER-THE-TOP" MAY BE ONE WAY TO DESCRIBE him — as over-the-top as someone who's got his feet firmly planted on the ground can be. Marcel Wanders is a man of extremes and contradictions. Tremendously likable and charismatic, he can also be defensive and in-your-face. After growing up as an ugly duckling, he now enjoys a reputation for being a handsome charmer, with his friendly mug plastered on magazine covers and products alike. Similar ironies resonate in his work. His creations run the gamut from minimal, intelligent, and highly sophisticated to bordering on kitsch. He's produced countless truly beautiful interiors, but their understated elegance can be overshadowed by his other, circuslike spaces where flashy elements such as giant, breathing mannequins or heart-shaped "love suites" steal the show. His striking products for Moooi, the furniture company he founded in 2001, are all the more alluring thanks to a series of seductive campaigns featuring stunning nude models. Wanders himself isn't afraid to get naked — he stripped down during one lecture — but will show up fully dressed at other times. He loves being the center of attention but will graciously yield the limelight to a deserving up-and-comer. He is the life of the party but a consummate professional. And when the discussion turns to design, he is dead serious.

MW: That was the first time I participated in Art Basel, and what happened there was very nice, but I've always been working on limited editions and small numbers. All the things we did for Cappellini were kind of limited editions, but there were also lots of things we never exhibited. Now, I have the time and energy to push it. We showed the Crochet Chair in Miami. It is a new development that we had been working on for over two years. I really love the airiness of it. We have pushed that theme with more sculptural objects. The objects are very archetypical, but in a very mixed way and in all different directions — plants, fossils, topiary, cartoon figures.

WW: *Many designers seem to be focusing more on limited edition pieces. Here in New York in just the past few months, Marc Newson and Ross Lovegrove had major gallery exhibits of their limited edition works.*

MW: The world of design has changed over the years. We've been pushing design in a direction where it's finding a larger and larger audience and it's more and more emotionally connected to people. As the public grows, I always see that every group of people can be divided into pyramids. At the base there are a lot of people, and at the top, fewer people. When you enlarge the base, you make the top higher. So there's that need for a type of design that is higher on the top, more specific, more special, more precious, more unique. It doesn't only go back to Art Basel; it goes back to the fact that we've created a world of design that is larger and larger, therefore we have to aim higher and higher, and it's the same people, of course, who are able to do this.





Left
Marcel Wanders
...
One Minute Delft Blue
2006
Porcelain,
hand painted
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio

Right
Marcel Wanders
...
Airborne Snotty Vase "Coryza"
2001
Polyamide
5.9 x 5.9 x 5.9 inches
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio
Photo by Maarten van Houten

WHITEWALL: *Tell me about some of the pieces you just showed in Milan in April.*

MARCEL WANDERS: We showed for Moooi, of course, but we also did an exhibit of personal editions, things we do in the studio.

WW: *Was this inspired in part by your participation last December in Art Basel Miami?*

WW: *Have you had to switch your focus or scale back on other projects to devote so much time to this?*

MW: I've chosen to be a little more direct in my approach to

"WE'VE CREATED A WORLD OF DESIGN THAT IS LARGER AND LARGER, THEREFORE WE HAVE TO AIM HIGHER AND HIGHER"

MARCEL WANDERS
s arm around "One Minute Delft Blue,"
a porcelain vase from his collection



This page
Marcel Wanders
...
Mondrian South Beach Hotel
Renderings
Set for completion in December 2007
Courtesy of Morgans Hotel Group

"I DO THINK THAT THE DESIGN INDUSTRY IS VERY BORING"

design, to make more of a clear choice about what I want to do and don't want to do. There are a lot of projects that I've mostly done myself anyhow — most manufacturers don't want to do that much for you. I always made the prototype because most of the products are out of their normal league. It's not like I make a drawing and they make the prototype. So it's logical to take more responsibility myself in the project.

WW: *Is that in a sense why you also started Moooi?*

MW: A little bit. When I started in 1996 to make my own productions, it was because the design industry, or design world, in all its virtue, wasn't for the people. There was a lot of design all over magazines but it was never in the market. I think I wanted to find a way to make it real, to get it to the people. When I started Moooi it was because I was producing



"I'VE TRIED ALL MY LIFE NOT TO HAVE A MYSELF MORE FREEDOM TO WORK WITH

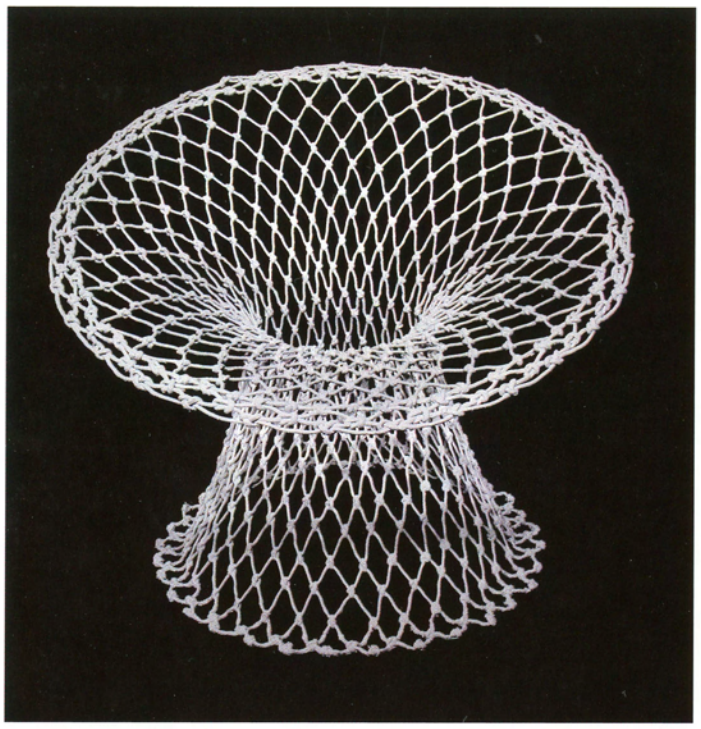
my own work, but also because I wanted to create possibilities for other designers.

WW: *Why is that so important to you, to help other designers?*

MW: I think design has a real value in life. It gives so much joy to me and so many other people. I want young designers to be as successful as possible as soon as possible so they can give their value to the world. With virtual design — if I can call it that — you know, it's very important and valuable, but I think we cannot only give that. We should give more.

WW: *In a conversation we once had about Achille Castiglioni*





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Marcel Wanders
...
Fishnet Chair
2001
Plaited carbon armchair
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders for Capellini

v
Marcel Wanders
...
Happy Hour Chandelier
2005

Choreographer Nanine Linning and Marcel Wanders came up with an innovative concept in hospitality, art, and design: being served flutes of champagne by sexy floating angels.

Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio and Nanine Linning

same products all over again. That's why the whole area of doing limited edition pieces is something I'm taking more seriously. Not only because it's new for me in a way, but because it brings me to a new level of responsibility for myself. That's great fun, but it also means personal growth. I believe you can only grow professionally if you grow personally.

WW: *Tell me about the Mondrian Hotel you are designing in South Beach.*

MW: We're in the midst of designing all the details for it. It should open at the end of this year or the beginning of the next. It's a lot of work but also a lot of fun, and we're talking with the client — Morgans Hotel Group — about working on other projects together. We've started on a Mondrian Hotel for Las Vegas, but that's a long way off — the building hasn't even been built yet.

WW: *You've often been referred to as a "showman." How do you feel about being called that?*





STYLE. NOW, IF I'M REALLY HONEST, I GIVE A SENSE OF STYLE THAN I DID BEFORE"

and the designers of his generation, I remember you said that, for you, being a good designer is not enough.

MW: Designers like Castiglioni never took the next step. I think it's great if you're a creative person to challenge your creativity in new areas and design structures or strategies that are beyond your normal behavior, your league. For me to set up Moooi was for sure one of these challenges, and within Moooi we set up the young designer's coaching program. I recently bought a ten-million-euro property in Amsterdam where we're going to rent out three floors to the creative industry. I'm always trying to challenge myself on higher levels. You know, I'm not going to keep doing the

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Marcel Wanders
...
Villa Moda store in Bahrain
To be opened in 2007
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio

MW: Well, you know, I'm a communicator. It's kind of where I am — to say I'm a showman. I mean, Jasper Morrison is not called a showman, right? But the question is a little difficult to answer. I do think that the design industry is very boring. There are tons of designers who tend to speak about engineering all day and how fabulously a piece is produced, but the fact is, our audience couldn't care less. They are not designers or engineers and they have lives that are about different things. I've decided I want to do things that I really care about, products that really speak to people and find an audience. And I'm sure the only way I can get to these people is to be a communicator. If you ask some people to speak about their work, they're just sitting on a chair and

giggling a little bit because they have nothing to say, and that's fine — fun and simple and nice, but it's not my approach. And it's not that I have a big mouth or that I can talk so nicely; it's because I design what I'm speaking about. Whenever I do a design, there's visual, rational, and emotional information. So by the time you're asking me about it, I can tell you about it. In the end, if I'm a designer and a communicator, and I'm onstage, and I'm putting my name on an object — what should I do, be boring? Be uncommunicative? No. I'm going to be crazy and exciting and I'm going to be sure you have the best time and, you know, why not? If I'm a communicator, I have to do it in a way that really talks to you. If that makes me a showman, then it's fine with me. Perhaps that's great.



WW: *But that's still not a label you're comfortable with?*

MW: I don't have a problem with the name — I just think a lot of showmen have show but no content.

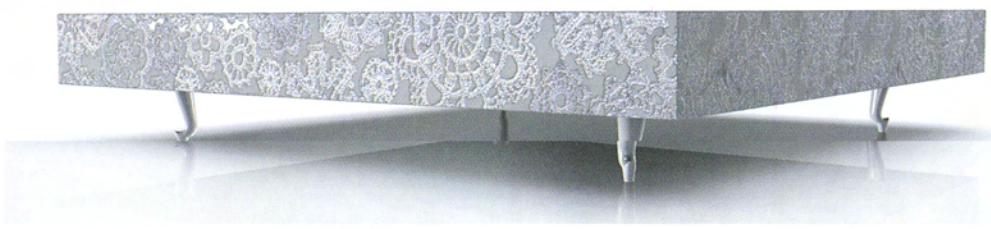
WW: *Are you worried, then, that people will identify you more with the spectacle than with the quality of your products?*

MW: I'm afraid that if they call me a showman, they stop listening. Last year, we introduced the Boutique sofas for Moooi, and one of the fabrics I included was a fabric I designed that has my face on it, the picture where I'm wearing the clown nose. I called it Jester and wrote a one-liner with it that read, "Some think he's a fool, others count his results." I try not to be a communicator of nothing, but I also try not to have something to say and not say it. You have to speak up.

Principally, I think if a designer puts his name on a product it should be good for the product. What if you are not as nice as your product is? Perhaps it's better not to put your name there, right? Just imagine, you're buying a little bowl and it has this crazy name on it and you have no idea who it is. A week later you read about this dull, boring guy who's got the name that's under your bowl. Suddenly, the bowl's not so exciting anymore. If you're a "signature designer" — which is kind of the fashionable word for it — you're part of the work. You know, they call me vain, which of course I am — I am vain. But they call me vain in a negative way. I'm part of the deal. I want people to think of me not just as the designer, but to think, "Wow, that's great and that guy is super." It's truly fantastic when I see in the eyes of an audience that they're really excited and love what I've done. That's why I wake up on Monday morning and start doing it all again.

"YOU KNOW, THEY CALL ME VAIN, WHICH OF COURSE I AM — I AM VAIN. BUT THEY CALL ME VAIN IN A NEGATIVE WAY"









WW: *Is there more pressure on you once you've achieved a certain level of fame?*

MW: There is pressure, but the question is whether this pressure is on me. I don't try to be the best designer in the world. If tomorrow morning someone else makes some fantastic work, I'm going to be very happy for them. Besides, designers are not at all in the area of being real celebrities. I think that architecture, and perhaps art and fashion, are far more important in people's hearts and heads. We're doing a pretty good job, better than we did, say, ten years ago, but there's still a lot for us to do.

WW: *The work of many designers is very recognizable — for instance, you can always spot a piece by Karim Rashid — but at times I've been completely surprised to see your name attached to a product I would have never guessed you designed. Are you ever surprised by the things you've created?*

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Marcel Wanders
...
Crochet Chair
2006
Crochet and epoxy resin
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio and Friedman Benda

Middle right
Marcel Wanders
...
Knotted Chair
1996
Aramide braid and carbon center rope
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders for Cappellini

Middle left
Marcel Wanders
...
Pizzo Carrara
2007
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders studio and Friedman Benda

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Marcel Wanders
...
Courage
2006
Jester fabric, Puppy XL
Courtesy of Marcel Wanders Studio





MARCEL WANDERS
with one of the eight large, hand-painted, porcelain bells shown at Milan



MW: Oh yeah, most of the things. For the Mondrian Hotel we're designing in South Beach, we put in the showers a chandelier from which the water comes out. Just imagine walking into a shower and finding no showerhead, just a chandelier. To me that's surprising. When Puma asked me to do an outdoor line, I was surprised I could come up with anything interesting because, to me, designing for the outdoors is the most terrible and boring area in the world. I think a lot of designers work based on a sense of style — they love a certain shape and they love to do that over and over again. I have no problem with that for somebody else. For me, it was death. I've tried all my life not to have a style. Now, if I'm really honest, I give myself more freedom to work with a sense of style than I did before.

WW: *Are you where you imagined you'd be at this stage in your career when you first started designing?*

MW: Yeah. I'm doing exactly what I've always wanted to do. Strange, huh?

WW: *Strange or lucky?*

MW: There's a lot of luck involved, of course. But you make luck happen. I'm very lucky in that I live in a culture that understands creativity. That's a beautiful thing. But, hey, it doesn't matter in the end, you know? ... If it were only luck, then [*laughing*] I'd be very lucky. Who cares?! WW

A new Villa Moda store designed by Wanders opened in Bahrain on May 12. Currently, Wanders is designing a residence in Jakarta, working on both the architecture and interior. In early November, he will present a new "Can of Gold" project in Belgium. This project in the past has taken place in Hamburg, Washington, Sidney, London, and Mexico, where cans designed by Wanders have been sold to benefit the homeless, food banks, youth groups, and other charitable organizations.