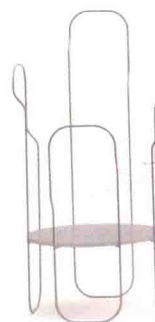


matali crasset



text by alexandra midal
introduction by zoë ryan

edited by francis fichot,
alexandra midal, and andreas hoyer



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This book is dedicated to my parents, my little family, my partner Francis, Popline and Arto. And to Nit, my twin.

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Internationally recognized for her autonomous design language, the work of Paris-based Matali Crasset is centered on creating what she refers to as “scenarios for life,” projects that rethink the spaces and objects that have come to define daily activities. Working across a diverse range of scales and typologies of projects, Matali is intent on studying the forces that shape our world in an effort to begin to develop an original and sustainable grammar for new objects and environments that go beyond traditional questions of form and function.

Since creating seminal pieces such as the *Empathic Chair*, from 1994, for example—a chair, meant for public spaces, equipped with a number of different elements that can be attached to it, from a bike rack to a birdcage—Crasset has continued to generate designs with multiple-functions and dimensions that adapt to changing needs and lifestyles. Works such as *When Jim Comes to Paris*, from 1998—a survival kit for an overnight guest that comprises a thin mattress, a bedside light and an alarm clock that can be rolled up and stowed away—emphasize her long-standing interest in reexamining the design of indispensable typologies of objects and their roles within society.

Born in 1965 into a family of farmers in the village of Normée, near Châlons-en-Champagne, in northeast France, Crasset began her training with a brief stint studying marketing at the École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle in Paris. Disillusioned with the narrow focus of the course, she changed direction, and graduated, in 1991, in design. A chance meeting with designer Denis Santachiara in Milan led to an apprenticeship in his studio. However, it was while working under the tutelage of Philippe Starck in his Paris-based studio that Crasset really cut her teeth. Hired in 1993 to work on products for Thomson Multimedia, Starck later promoted her to head of Tim Thom, Thomson’s Design Center. It was there that she produced her signature *Soundstation* radio alarm. Unlike the austere black boxes that typified electronics at the time, Crasset’s radio harks back to earlier designs for music players and focuses on the sound of the radio. A horn-like speaker protrudes from an otherwise uncluttered, slender control panel dotted with flexible rubber on-off and volume-control buttons that make the radio especially easy to use. The memorable design set the tone for Crasset’s subsequent production, which has garnered her numerous awards and accolades.

bespoke production

zoë ryan

Since opening her own studio in 1998, Crasset has continued to undertake a process of rigorous research and development. She distills her ideas down to their essential elements, creating designs that are intelligent solutions, and at times unconventional responses to everyday life, that encourage users to reflect on conventional daily rituals while also suggesting alternative modes of behavior.

These ideas are evident in recent work, such as the simple forms and materials used to produce her *Instant Chair* and *Instant Table* for Moustache, from 2009, which are reminiscent of furniture found on a farm, made from wood. The legible designs and the ease with which they are assembled echo furniture made for children, yet more importantly signal Crasset's insistence that her designs be accessible to a broad range of people of all ages and backgrounds so that they may be readily incorporated within daily life. Taking these ideas to a larger scale, she developed *Open Room No.1*, in 2009, for British company Established & Sons. More an environment than an individual piece of furniture, the design incorporates a desk, cupboard, lamp, rubbish bin, and rug. The project was conceived as an insertion into an existing space, framing an area and providing all the necessary elements for undertaking work, yet without the need to build walls.

Crasset's open-minded approach draws inspiration from designers such as Achille & Pier, Giacomo Castiglioni and Joe Colombo from Italy, as well as lesser-known figures such as Nanna Ditzel from Denmark, who steered a new direction toward multifunctional outcomes. These designers borrowed references from across disciplines and were adept at extracting and reinterpreting concepts drawn from contemporary culture that helped them creatively challenge conventional designs and encourage user interaction. An apt example is the Castiglioni brothers' *Sella Stool*, from 1957, made from a bicycle saddle fixed to a steel pole with a semicircular base—a product that grew out of their desire to create a seat for a telephone kiosk that users could balance on. Rather than restrict movement, the design encourages it as an active response to talking on the phone. Other designers were inspired by the idea of creating living landscapes, or furniture that functioned on an architectural scale, that could accommodate individual and group occupancy and was meant to be appropriated any number of ways—emphasizing its dual role as both furniture and environment. In 1969, Joe

Colombo created a prototype dwelling called *Visiona*, or Habitat of the Future, which consisted of a modular unit containing all the essential functional elements needed for cooking, sleeping, and living in a series of open-plan spaces defined in Colombo's signature colors of white, yellow, red and black. Later works such as *Total Furnishing Unit* (1969) further emphasized his interest in determining complete, multifunctional living environments that include all the functional requirements for living as an exercise in efficient, yet pliable design. Ditzel was also a forerunner in the design of experimental furniture systems generated to give occupants maximum flexibility of use. Her *Floating Dock* (1961), made for Scandinavian company Kolds, is a multifaceted design consisting of seating elements that can be arranged in various configurations. In addition to framing a space, they provide areas for more formal or casual seating. Custom-built, interchangeable trays created to sit flush on the tops of the seating platforms provide areas for working, eating, and playing. Like her predecessors, Crasset searches for work that will introduce subtle twists that challenge preconceived ideas and incite interaction, helping her produce work that goes beyond historical examples and instead responds to contemporary ways of living, and using materials and manufacturing processes that speak to the time in which an object or an environment is made.

Over the course of her practice, Crasset's work has continued to diversify in typology and scale to include products, furniture, installations, interior design and most recently architecture, characterized by a bold approach that is often imbued with playful qualities.

Experiencing an environment designed by Crasset, however, is not always an entirely comfortable experience. Take the interiors of the Hi Hotel in Nice, France, opened in 2008, which is defined by its colorful palette, and oddly shaped, at times gawky-looking furniture. At check-in guests are presented with a menu from which to choose their desired type of room. Are you a high-tech geek that needs to be plugged-in 24/7 or more of an aesthete delighted by the thought of staying in an all white room? These are just two of the spaces on offer, but they give a sense of Matali's intentions. Although made to suit different tastes and fulfill individual requirements, her interiors do not put you at ease. At times they are even a little disorientating; one isn't sure whether to sit, lie or stand on the low-slung modular furniture. But that is exactly the point. Comfort in the more traditional sense, associated

with luxury, isn't high on Matali's agenda. Instead she values the transformative potential of objects. For Matali, comfort stems from freedom of movement and the ability to interact with the people, spaces and objects that surround us in an intuitive fashion. Rather than putting you at ease, however, Crasset is far more interested in creating work that pulls you out of your comfort zone. She enjoys producing work that invites interaction and questions our relationships with the objects and spaces that define daily life. This idea is reinforced by earlier projects that illustrate Crasset's continued interest in finding and redefining the meanings of the objects and environments that have come to define daily life. For example, in 2002, she was commissioned to conceive of a prototype bathroom for the German company Dornbracht. Called *Phytolab*, the design defied the rules. Rather than a place of seclusion, Crasset's design, made from a transparent acrylic cube dotted with plant life, created only minimal points of privacy. Instead, the bathroom encouraged users to experience the act of bathing as one might outdoors in nature, through smell and touch, and raised questions about our need for seclusion and isolation.

The Dar Hi Hotel in Nefta, Tunisia, is a sister hotel to the Hi Hotel in Nice, developed in collaboration with the owners Patrick Elouarghi and Philippe Chapelet, but envisioned as an altogether different type of getaway destination that has been custom-made to suit this unique location. Situated in the south of Tunisia, Nefta is characterized by its desert landscape, as well as an area of natural oasis. The region has significant historical roots and is considered by most Sufis to be the spiritual home of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam. The goal of the project was to create a hotel for spiritual and physical wellbeing, in which there are fluid boundaries between the inside and outside spaces, creating areas for communal gatherings and more private space. Drawing on the rich local crafts tradition, the hotel is made of three different types of accommodation based on customary types of Tunisian lodgings. The Pill Houses are individual adobe-style dwellings—*dar* means house in Tunisian—made from ochre-colored bricks that form a village of buildings that are protected by an exterior wall, an organizational structure that is native to the area. Raised above ground on stilts, the spaces below the houses provide shaded areas for lounging out of the sun, and the living quarters above ground provide unobstructed views across the desert. The central courtyard functions like a town square with a bar where guests can come together to socialize, as well

as water fountains and other areas in which children can play. The Troglodytes, as their name suggests, are more independent places to stay. Larger in format, they function as individual apartments with living and sleeping quarters and communal terraces, yet they are also joined by a central courtyard equipped with a bread oven for collective activities such as dining together. The last type of accommodation is the Dunes, which are at ground level. Open-plan, they provide loft-style living and sleeping quarters and greater connections to the outdoors and the adjacent desert landscape.

In addition to the various types of accommodation, the hotel also has a collective dining room and kitchen where chefs cook meals focused on traditional dishes from the region and made from local produce. Guests are welcome to enter the kitchen and learn about local recipes and are encouraged to aid in the preparation of meals. Also essential to the hotel is the spa, which includes an open-air infinity pool for swimming. The hotel is designed as a retreat from daily life; where rest and relaxation is paramount and one is free to determine his or her own activities either in private or as a family or group. However, key to the experience is the essence of the natural environment, which not only provides a backdrop but is also woven into every aspect of the experience of staying in the hotel. As part of the ecological nature of the hotel, it has been designed to minimize harm to the environment as much as possible and instead maximize benefits to the local surroundings. Initiatives include using only natural ventilation and locally sourced materials, as well as directing water run-off to the local oasis, which the owners of the hotel are currently working to help protect and conserve through an internationally recognized, non-profit support group. They have engaged environmental experts in undertaking studies of the area in order to propose methods for rehabilitating this natural resource, which is currently being left in decline.

Developing bridges between the man-made and natural world has been a constant source of inspiration for Crasset's work. The Hi hotels are not the first projects to be driven by natural systems and organizing principles. In 2004, Crasset was invited by the French region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais to help promote the local custom of breeding and training pigeons, for which she designed a human-sized, bright orange birdhouse. The loft-space that is six meters in height and five meters wide was built to accommodate both humans and pigeons,

ensuring both felt at home. More recent projects to foreground ideas drawn from our natural surroundings include *Twin Lights*, developed in 2008 as part of an exhibition at the Rabih Hage Gallery in London. As its name suggests, the light has dual functions for use indoors and out. Topped with electroluminescent panels, the light draws energy from the moon to power it during the evening. At night, the harvested energy in the panels can be transferred indoors to power a nightlight.

Matali's concern for finding even greater possibilities for producing objects and buildings in a more human-centered and sustainable fashion, drawing inspiration from nature, are underscored in *Spring City/ Spring Skin*, a project developed in 2010 for an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. The multi-part installation forms part of a larger dialogue and investigation by her studio into innovations of new technologies that are prompting more advanced formal and functional outcomes inspired by the evolutionary process found in nature. In the animation, a forest of trees grows into buildings that morph and change depending on the time of day and the climatic conditions. In a series of drawings, the same trunk-like forms evolve into the form of the human body, emphasizing the inherent links between the natural and manmade world. Crasset's conceptually-driven design aims ultimately to encourage the viewer to reflect on the relationship we have with our surroundings and make a case for a greater awareness of the impact of our actions.

Crasset's close-knit design team works from her home/office in Paris, which is located within a complex of live/work spaces that provide a community-driven environment as a reflection of her inherent interest in human interaction. Developing projects with a hands-on approach, her portfolio of work is a testament to her desire to be responsive to contemporary social and environmental issues. She develops outcomes that seek relevance to contemporary society through a multifaceted approach and engages difference as a logistical tool that affords her new possibilities for original creative expressions that heighten our awareness of everyday life.

What ultimately makes Crasset's work stand out, however, is her interest in design as a cultural and creative endeavor. Rather than divorced from the past, she determines tailor-made solutions that are imbued with recognizable silhouettes and shapes that reinterpret historical methods and practices for a contemporary context. The results are original solutions that provide a starting point for discussion, opening up new thinking and discovery, and encouraging more profound social and human exchanges.