



# FRAME

105

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THE GREAT DOORS

Cover image by Bonsoir Paris

**Make  
Less**

**Think  
More**



**10 Product  
Designers**

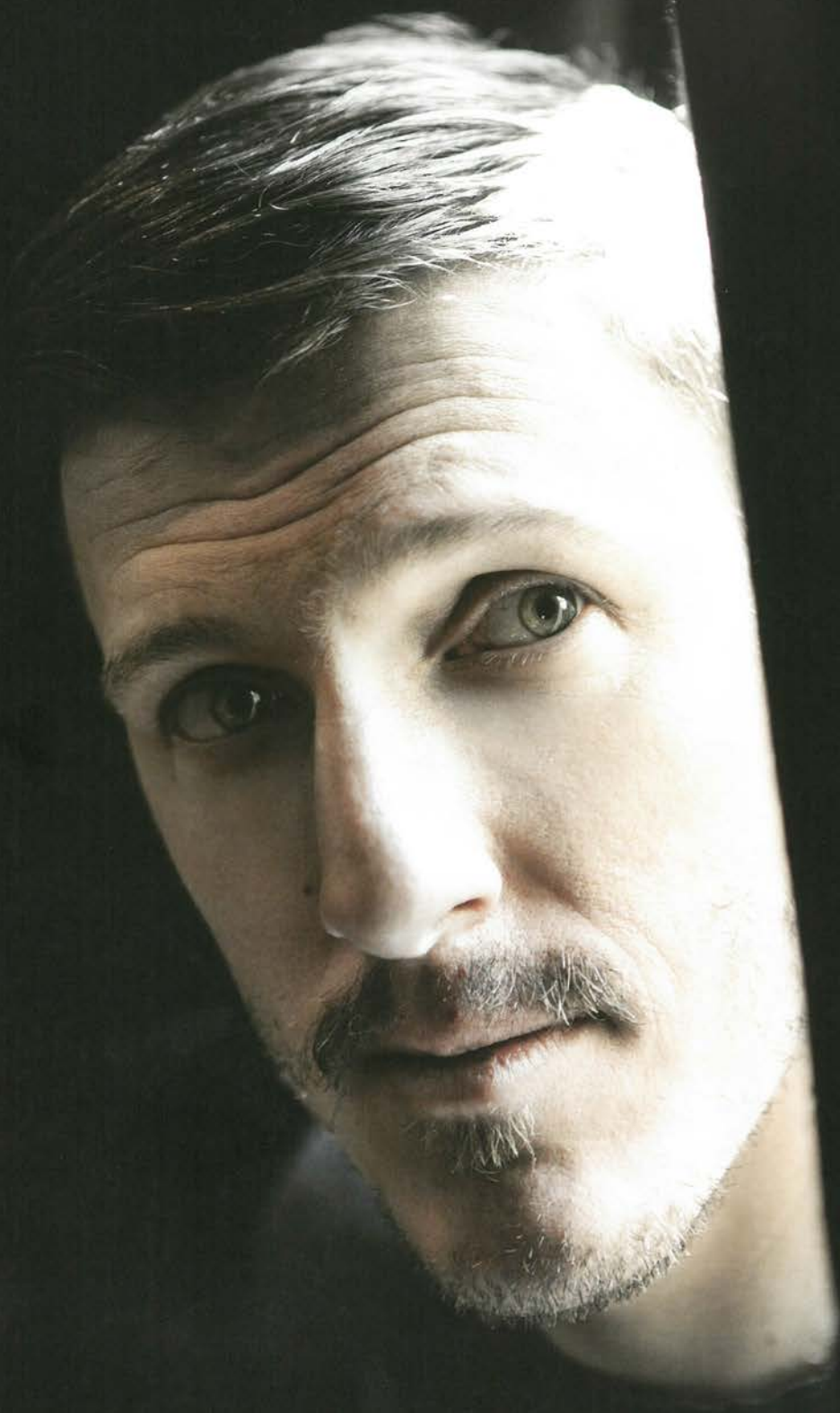
**Changing  
the Game**

**Milan Design Week**  
Revelations from the  
Salone del Mobile

**Lee Bul**  
'We humans are most  
aware of ourselves'

**Ilse Crawford**  
'There is no such thing  
as design any more'

**Sanitary Special**  
The business of  
self-indulgence



Thilo Brunner: 'It's a misunderstanding that designers work only with an eye to aesthetics'

## 'We're heading towards a world with fewer products'

### As head of the master's programme in product design at ÉCAL, Thilo Brunner works with students who are leading the pack. The designer-cum-tutor hopes that products will become more emotionally charged.

WORDS Jeannette Petrik PORTRAITS Antonio Campanella

**Does the future of products follow tendencies that point away from material production?** THILO BRUNNER: I'm not sure if the only tendency we see in design today is a move away from products. We are certainly confronted increasingly with things being dematerialized and perhaps becoming a bit less physical, but there will always be physical products. The field of design is getting more and more diverse. You could say that design is one basic discipline that could lead to ten or more different professions. This is a big change.

**How important is the trend towards more conceptual design for you, personally?** I'm a fan of physical products, but I'm interested in thorough thinking and production. I think we're heading towards a world with fewer products. We'll become very selective about the products we use. I can imagine a world where high quality will trump quantity. I also hope that products will become more emotionally charged again, so that we take better care of them. Hopefully this would lead us away from trashing objects as easily as we have done for the past, let's say, 20 years.

**You published a personal manifesto that highlights your attitude towards design. There's a section that concludes with the**

**sentence: 'Arts and crafts, we love you for other reasons.' Do you see potential for future developments in crafts?** The manifesto is not a dogma. It's reflective of the work I've done and how I do it. It comes from a practical perspective. My own work is rather industrial. I'm interested in the elegance of reduction, in reasonable beauty. As designers working with mass or large-scale production, we have a lot of pull and will hopefully continue to do so in the future. For me, it's not contradictory to want to do something positive for the future of the environment and to still work in the big industries. Perhaps you can raise your voice a little louder with a conceptual piece of design because it's a bigger statement, but you won't have the same level of production. There is huge value in making things by hand, and I'm definitely into that. Personally, though, I'm more of an industrial designer.

**If we had fewer things but of better quality, would this also call for other kinds of manufacturing methods? Would industrial production have to change?** It probably is going to change. Looking at product design at ÉCAL and thinking about influences and current directions, I recognize the vital need for dialogue on the subject. Everyone searches

for their individual truths, and there really isn't a 'wrong'. The matter becomes complex, however, when you work with people from various backgrounds who have completely different perceptions of design. Then, working together is like a ping-pong match or like sparring. Being uncomfortable, challenging people and even triggering some friction in the work process are what we are ultimately paid for. We're not paid to say: yeah, yeah, everything is fine as it is.

**When you start a project, do ethical considerations matter?** This is one of the most difficult choices in our profession. In our office we never established a rule that says we don't work with million-dollar companies; we evaluate each case individually. It's a misunderstanding that designers work only with an eye to aesthetics – only to make things look nice. Today's designers are increasingly involved in bigger processes. We work as consultants, not simply as makers. This is where it gets extremely interesting.

**How important is dialogue in the development of a project?** Dialogue is a huge part of the process. I don't see the production industry as the devil. There are lots of good people in manufacturing with whom we want to maintain a line of communication.

**So designers need social skills?** Yes, I think that everything from psychology to a talent for drawing is important to the development of good design – in dialogue with others.

**To refer once more to your manifesto, you write that design should not surrender to society and that you are not afraid of being elitist.** I recently read an apparently quite well-known speech by David Foster Wallace called 'This Is Water' [also available in book form]. He states that real freedom lies in willingly deciding how to perceive things and people ↪

### Thilo's Product Pick

**We asked Brunner to illustrate his vision on industrial design with one product. He selected the bottle he designed with Jörg Mettler for Sigg.**



'They're a family of sturdy thermoses. I chose them because they belong to a category of physical products that won't be replaced by immaterial ones: products used for food and drinks. I like to think they reference a good old friend – the original Sigg bottle – because they look very simple and inconspicuous, despite the high-tech complexity that went into their development. The bottles are democratic in price and readily available. They restrict the overuse of PET bottles. The original Sigg bottle is an icon; it makes the brand. It's a single-walled bottle with no insulation, basically the same inside and out. The opening is very small, about the same size as that of a classic PET bottle.

'Sigg asked us to come up with the first Swiss-designed, Sigg-produced thermos. Because of the

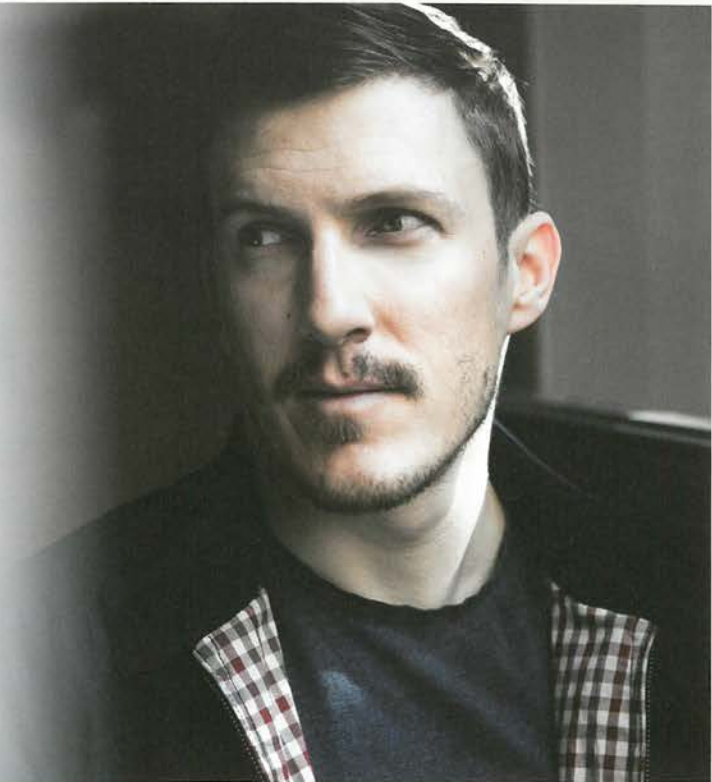
iconic design of the original bottle, it was clear from the outset that we wouldn't be starting with a clean slate. Our job was more about treating the old guy with respect, while giving him a more contemporary appearance. We knew the market demanded a larger opening, and we had to incorporate insulation. The double-walled construction considerably increases the total volume of the bottle, but it holds the same amount of liquid. The goal was to make a sleek form despite the extra volume. To make the shapes as fluid as possible, we used splines to draw the bottles. To get the desired curves and balanced proportions, we constantly changed splines, often fighting for tenths of millimetres to achieve a pleasing overall look.'

[sigg.com](http://sigg.com)

## Thilo Brunner

Swiss-born Thilo Brunner (1977) began his career at Swatch before establishing his own design studio in Zurich. He followed up his industrial-design education with a master's from the Design for Luxury and Craftsmanship Department at ÉCAL, where he now teaches and heads the master's programme in product design. Brunner has two studios in Zurich: Thilo Alex Brunner and Brunner Mettler Collabo, the latter in partnership with Jörg Mettler.

thiloalexbrunner.ch  
brunnermettler.ch



to overcome what he calls the 'default setting'. I would describe this default setting as conformity. Conformity allows you to do only what people ask of you, requests that correspond to the current situation. That's what I mean when I say design means not to surrender to society. Again, I don't want to judge which way is best; people have different ideas of how to make a change for the better. 'We are not afraid of being elitist' doesn't refer to social hierarchy. To give an example, a few years ago a designer stated that a phone doesn't *need* a keyboard. That in itself is quite elitist. You shouldn't be afraid to change big things with design.

**It's interesting, then, to consider how designers as thinkers connect to the wider society.** Twenty years ago, parents pushed their children into working their way up in a bank or an insurance company, especially kids who didn't know exactly what to do once they'd finished school. And that was probably fine, because it gave them the basic skills required for many jobs. That's what happens in design education today: you get a broad set of skills that combines the intellectual and the practical. The result is a contemporary mind-set that gives you a good basis for tackling the problems of the world.

**What is the contemporary mind-set like?** It comprises the ability to observe and analyse with precision; to approach problems from a good, often unexpected, angle; and to find solutions

using the right tools. Over the years, designers develop their own ways of applying these principles. At my studio, we like to see ourselves as giving shape to experiences, not to objects.

**Does this tie into to what you said about the future of design moving towards dematerialization?** For me, certainly. I'm interested in what something looks like, but I'm more interested in how something *works*. Above all, I'm interested in what it enables us to *do*.

**Do you see recent changes in the attitudes of design students?** I became involved in design education in 2009. What I've seen, generally speaking, is a growing

concern about the world. People care more and more about material consumption, and that's a very positive change. The beauty of functionality is making a comeback.

**A comeback sure to influence the shape of products. Beauty is a relevant issue for many designers, but does it have to be considered even when an object works well?** Beauty is highly relevant, but it's also very personal, very subjective. It's fun to have discussions about the beauty or ugliness of an object, but in the end it's a matter of personal taste. Let me be very Swiss and say that if a thing *doesn't* work well, there's a good chance it's ugly too. ✕

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‘It's not contradictory to want to do something positive for the future of the environment and to still work in the big industries’

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## ÉCAL

**There seems to be no limit to the Swiss design school's creativity. And by being critical, entertaining and thought-provoking all in one, ÉCAL students can certainly make even bigger waves.**



ÉCAL's Salone show has become one of the most talked-about events during Milan Design Week – and for good reason. The two most recent offerings gave visitors exactly what they were craving after a week of walking around and looking at static pieces on display: interactivity. Delirious Home from 2014 featured cuddly cacti and motion-tracking clocks among its engaging objects (*Frame* 99, p. 136), whereas students this year tackled the selfie phenomenon.

ÉCAL certainly puts on a good show, but that's not what sets the school apart. It's that creativity seemingly has no bounds in Lausanne, regardless of the topic. The Milan exhibitions are manifestations of interdisciplinary collaborations (2014 combined the skills of students in the design and communication departments, and this year saw future product designers team up with photography students), and the results make cross-pollination feel so natural – the kind of stuff that makes you wonder why you didn't think of it yourself.

Here's where things get even more interesting: as the exhibition gains ground and becomes increasingly talked about (and tweeted and Instagrammed and . . .), the themes may start to up the criticism ante. A slight shift was already visible this year: the #PhotoBooth project analysed the way mobile phones – and the consequent selfie phenomenon – are affecting the way we view ourselves. As Thilo Brunner (p. 162) walked me through the exhibition – in which students had created a series of selfie-inspired interactive installations – he smirked at the irony of it all. Even though it was designed as a critical take on selfies, the real addicts saw only a playground full of countless photo opportunities.

When design can reach people on different levels, it's bound to set wheels in motion. Where those wheels will lead the industry is not certain, but if ÉCAL's way of thinking can be applied to an even bigger picture, the results will be worth sticking around for. — TI  
ecal.ch

ÉCAL's #PhotoBooth project during this year's Milan Design Week analysed the omnipresent selfie.