



The Maniera collection / © SvenLaurent

— Maybe there is no more  
trustworthy model for intense  
beauty than forms which  
originate in great bitterness. <sup>-1</sup> —

Roger Caillois



## DESIGN WITHOUT DESIGN. FURNITURE BY OFFICE AND ANNE HOLTROP, PHOTOGRAPHY BY BAS PRINCEN

— Christophe Van Gerrewey

In early 2014, Amaryllis Jacobs and Kwinten Lavigne opened a new gallery in Brussels. They asked architects and artists with little experience of furniture design to create furniture. The first prototypes – produced in limited series and already sold – were produced in the spring by Dutch architect Anne Holtrop and the Brussels practice Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen. Photographer Bas Princen who had already photographed work by Office as well as Holtrop, was asked to curate. Such an enterprise seems rather risky: these architects are in no way product designers or designers of precious objects. If they have anything in common, it is a direct, often conceptual reaction to the context in and for which they work: a concrete environment which is absent when designing furniture. Princen is known for his photographs of urban or landscape scenery, mostly without human presence, with difficult to interpret scale, origin, programme or meaning. The result is the first edition of Maniera, an event which consists of extremes. Extremes in furniture design (and the role of originality therein) are positively pursued here in an extreme way, so that the results encounter each other as the each other's negatives. In the middle stands the work of Princen, whose photographs unite the preferences and strategies of the architects.



Anne Holtrop / Hanging Desk / 2014 / © SvenLaurent



Anne Holtrop / Shelves / 2014 / © SvenLaurent



Anne Holtrop / Mirror / 2014 / © SvenLaurent

In short, Holtrop as well as Office intend to make useful and meaningful furniture without feeling comfortable in the role of designer as a creative genius who, in the tradition of humanism, uses the power of his inspiration, his talent, imagination and ingenuity to invent ideal solutions from nowhere. Holtrop falls back on natural forms from a past without knowable origin, with structures and patterns from an age long before humans were thought of. Office looks ahead to a post-human future as it were, a post-industrial age where forms and objects arise of themselves, because they are precise and exact, following mathematical machine logic.

Holtrop created a folding screen, a suspended desk and a small cupboard. He based this on the collection of stones of French author Roger Caillois, who in his book *Pierres* from 1971 described and interpreted the interior planes of cuts of agate, jasper and onyx. Fragments of such cuts are added to erratically circumscribed furniture pieces, executed in adhesive-bound fibreboard. The millennia old mineral images created without human intervention were painted as exact but magnified reproductions by Sylvie van der Kelen (from the Brussels-based Institut Supérieur de Peinture Van der Kelen). Visual structures which were hidden inside the mineral world, unseen by human eyes, suddenly become visually attractive, luxurious or plain but beautiful surfaces on ornamental objects, probably most appropriate for a boudoir, a romantic study or for sensuous undefined spaces, theatrical or private environments. At the same time, these patterns are not real or natural: they are the result of work-intensive craft and manual reproduction. Their boundaries (like the site of the cut through the original stones) are also the result of human, albeit not arbitrary decisions. This playful irony – the furniture is not what it pretends to be, but the illusion is practically perfect – cannot hide the primary creative decision by Holtrop: he gratefully uses an authorless, natural and external item as the basis for a new design.



Office / Solo Chair / 2014 / © SvenLaurent



Office made three tables (significantly, in cooperation with engineer Arthur de Roover), featuring dimensions based on the strength of the material and the potential structural span. The frames are made of industrial L-profiles in polyester, aluminium or steel, with a thin table top in the same material. The differences in material strength led to three distinct table sizes: 260 cm (in steel), 185 cm (in aluminium) and 100 cm (in polyester). The tabletops are covered with a thin layer of white epoxy resin: smooth, soft and even – you can push it with your fingernail and the impression will slowly disappear. Because of the give in the material, it is possible to put a sheet of paper on the table and easily write on it with a ballpoint pen. The table legs connect with the horizontal base with a thin, removable pin; the end of the connecting piece is at the centre of the leg, immediately beneath the top, subtle but clearly visible to emphasise the constructed character of the table. The Solo Chair is a geometric composition like the Solo House, the inspiration for the name of the furniture piece. The stool is a restatement of the ‘walking stick chair’ designed towards the end of the nineteenth century by Austrian manufacturer Michael Thonet. In Office’s version, the chair cannot be folded into a walking stick: the three legs are fixed and the circular seat remains in a horizontal position. The curved handle is also absent, replaced by a small square horizontal tablet, also coated in epoxy. To keep the stool balanced even when the tabletop is under pressure (for instance with a glass of water, or an elbow and lower arm supporting a head...), the corresponding foot on the other side of the leg is covered with an extra (white) weight. The elegant effect looks like a giraffe extending one leg after submerging it in white paint.

Designing here is not looking for something new, but re-discovering, re-newing and strategically revealing what already exists. Looked at in this way, Bas Princen is also a designer. His main activity is finding places, anywhere on earth, whose authorship is not clearly defined, in other words, where it is impossible to say if these places are the result of natural or cultural processes. *Petra* from 2012 is a good example: a high, vertical rock massif with eroded, weathered wall surfaces, accented with faint lines (like cutting edges in a quarry), and with amorphous voids, like holes made by animals or subsidence caused by the compression of the material after centuries of continuous gravity. How much is shown in the precisely framed image is the result of human, reasoned, perhaps even artistic intervention, but how much just happened to become like that, perhaps at a time before humans existed? This question about the value and the reach of human action and making, connects the furniture pieces by Office and Holtrop with Princen’s photographs in the context of the same thought processes.

The name of the gallery where this trio exhibited in Brussels and at *Interieur 2014* is *Maniera* – a reference to *Maniera Moderna*, a book and an exhibition from 2013 about the work of Italian architect and furniture designer Carlo Mollino (1905–1973). The book features a definition of mannerism: it seems playful while its spirit is hopelessly honest and serious. Like Princen’s photographs, the furniture by Office and Holtrop are the result of an inverse creation: they seem honest and serious, but they are the result of a playful spirit, borne by a smidgeon of hopelessness about the meaning of creative design and human intervention.

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Roger Callois, ‘Stenen’, in: *Raster*, nr. 55, 1991, p. 54.

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Hermann Czech, ‘Manierismus und Partizipation’, quoted in: Wilfried Kuehn, ‘Mollino’s Conceptual Mannerism’, in: Chris Dercon (red.), *Carlo Mollino. Maniera Moderna*, Walther König, Keulen, 2012, p. 279.