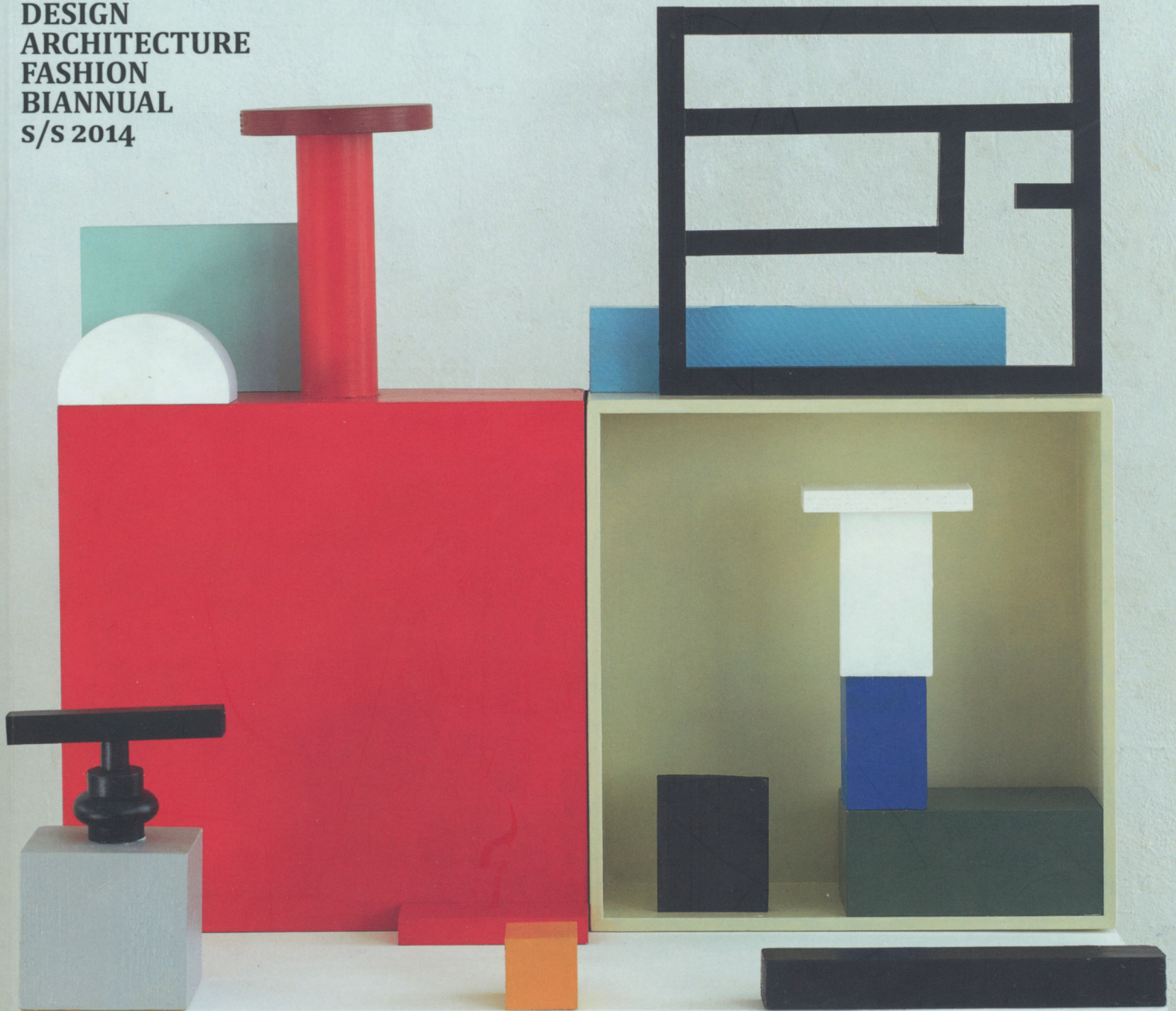


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Nathalie Du Pasquier

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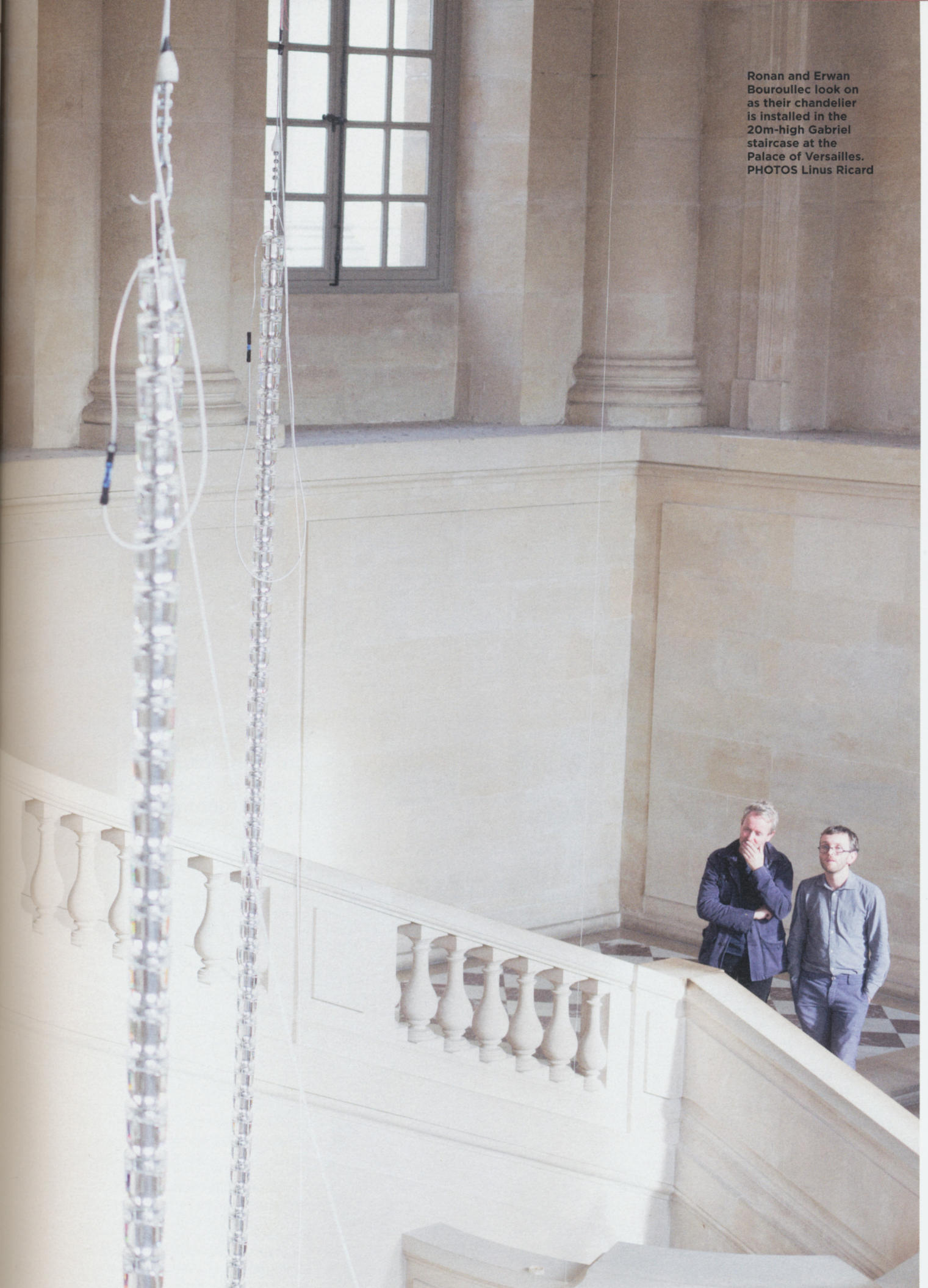


Lustre Gabriel

It's a few hours until the unveiling of Lustre Gabriel, a chandelier designed by Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec for the Palace of Versailles.

The French designers are pacing their studio in Belleville, Paris. The chandelier has been installed for over a week and the brothers have just finished giving feedback on a film about the project. >

Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec look on as their chandelier is installed in the 20m-high Gabriel staircase at the Palace of Versailles. PHOTOS Linus Ricard





The chandelier was built on site by a team of Swarovski engineers over a period of 24 hours, after three years of development work by the Bouroullecs.

intervention. Contemporary sculpture, it turned out, looked intriguing against 17th-century architecture.

“So, now the question was: ‘Should we commission an artist to execute a piece of art, a painting for the ceiling, for example, or commission a designer to create a piece of furniture?’” says Aillagon. He asked for advice from Martin Bethenod, then director of the FIAC art fair, now director of Palazzo Grassi in Venice. A competition was launched, not for ideas, but rather to ascertain suitable participants, and, upon the advice of Bethenod, Aillagon resolved to work with a designer. “There was a real need for furniture in this space, and therefore we didn’t need to think of transformation through a purely artistic lens,” says Aillagon. “Also, having a designer rather than an artist carrying out the transformation would be less likely to be polemical.”

But that doesn’t mean *Lustre Gabriel* has nothing to say. Consisting of 800 crystal lenses fitted around a core of LED lights,

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the chandelier’s physicality is palpable; with a weight of around 500kg, it still manages to look effortless. It even moves gently, a quality Erwan likens to Foucault’s pendulum, an experiment demonstrating the rotation of the Earth, named after French physicist Léon Foucault. “One of the big questions was how to be delicate and yet create something strong,” says Ronan. “Something with a contemporary character that worked with the space and still reflected us. We knew we probably had to create something big, because the space is 20m-high, so at first we tried to find a chameleon approach. For some months we thought that stone could be the material for this chandelier.”

The result of those early experiments can be seen in the much smaller *Perles de Jaspe* necklace that the Bouroullecs created for Galerie Kreo in 2012 (*Disegno* No.4). Although stone was eventually replaced by crystal >

> There is impatience rather than celebration in the air. Ronan doesn’t understand why there isn’t a shot of the chandelier in its entirety in the film, and Erwan is busy on a different project, hanging over the computer of one of their design assistants. “I have to consider the probability that when I die, it will still be there,” says Ronan. “Versailles is such a symbolic thing in France and having done this project is something that might stick to me as a label, a very strong one.”

Approaching the Palace of Versailles to the southwest of Paris feels as if you’re entering a historical Disneyland. We all vaguely know the stories that were played out here, snippets of information picked up in history classes and countless films and books. This is not just one of France’s most celebrated and famous buildings, but also an ostentatious symbol of the Ancien Régime, which came to a bloody end with the French Revolution in 1789.

Despite Versailles’ dubious symbolism, it’s been preserved, celebrated and improved over the past 200 years. About 6 million tourists visit annually to marvel at its Hall of Mirrors and Battles Gallery, as well as the once-upon-a-time bedchamber of Marie-Antoinette. Nowadays, many visitors enter the palace through the Gabriel staircase, a space only completed in 1985, but built according to the 1772 drawings of French architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel.

This classicist and rather cold two-storey staircase, executed in stone and marble, is the setting for the Bouroullecs’ *Lustre*

Gabriel, or *Gabriel Chandelier*. “When I came for the first meeting with [then president of Versailles] Jean-Jacques Aillagon to discuss if we wanted to be part of an invited competition, I went just to be polite,” says Ronan. “I thought this wasn’t for us, as we never do unique pieces.”

Yet three years on, there it hangs. A 12m-tall chandelier made up of four seemingly delicate strands of crystal, looped to form an organic decoration that illuminates the Gabriel staircase through the latest LED technology. The signature is undeniably Bouroullec, its sinuous lines and organically-created shape recalling their *Lianes* light installation at Galerie Kreo in 2010, or the *Algues* room-partitioning system for Vitra from 2004. And yet, it’s so other. The ostentation of crystal feels far removed from their previous material choices, but then again this project is quite unlike any of their other engagements.

Ever since the Gabriel staircase was completed there has been a sense of something missing in the space. When Aillagon became president in 2007, he decided to tackle the void. “It’s a very dry space,” says Aillagon, “so when I arrived at Versailles I decided it should be given personality through an artistic or architectural intervention.” The proposal was Aillagon’s, but he had to consult the curators and the national administration of historical monuments to seek expert opinion. The decision was made easier by the fact that Aillagon had previously invited contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons and Japan’s Takashi Murakami to exhibit at the palace. Both set the scene for the proposal of a permanent





shape in the sense that it's defined by gravity," says Erwan.

Lustre Gabriel is a product of its time. Despite its grand historical surroundings, its creation has been funded through sponsorship, rather than grants. "There was no money and we had to find a sponsor," says Ronan. In agreement with Versailles, the studio chose Austrian crystal producer Swarovski for a few reasons, the most compelling being its accuracy and the rigour of its engineers. "I'm fascinated by their culture of precision," says Ronan. "I wanted to be sure that in 50 years someone could come and still look after it."

This method of funding resonated with Aillagon, who authored the French 2003 law on sponsorship and foundations. The law's intention was to facilitate and develop the practice of patronage in France. "Its impact is very positive," says Aillagon. "It doesn't mean public action is to decline, quite the contrary. I think heritage preservation and expression of creation will be at their best if they benefit from the combination of public and private funding." Regardless of the positive impact of corporate funding for the arts, it is nevertheless a privilege to "buy" space in the midst of France's cultural history. Lustre Gabriel doesn't just showcase Swarovski's product. It also buys the brand an enduring cultural capital that will prove priceless.

Swarovski's benefit from the project shouldn't underplay its importance to the piece's creation. As the custom-made crystal components were fastened together around the chandelier's LED core by Swarovski engineers on 11 November 2013, there was still uncertainty as to what its final shape would actually be. "The shape got into position just when the final piece was lifted from the ground," says Erwan. One after another, the crystal cups were pulled into the air by a team of workers positioned in the eaves of Versailles. The workers' only view of what was happening below was four small holes drilled through the Gabriel ceiling. Everything had been double and triple-checked at the Swarovski research facility in Wattens, Austria, but that 13m-high warehouse space could not quite prepare the team for the pristine 20m-tall shell of the Gabriel staircase. "It had to be done in one shot," says Erwan. "We would have loved to have kept the door open - I mean, we spend our life fine-tuning things, but here fine-tuning was impossible."

It was only after the installation that it dawned on the Bouroullecs how crucial the precise distances between the different strands had been. The chandelier was carefully planned to occupy a 4.2sqm area of the ceiling, as anything bigger or smaller would have altered its shape significantly. Yet once installed, it emerged that 4.2sqm was the only size it could've been. The ceiling of the Gabriel staircase is supported by structural beams, through which the studio was not able to drill. Fortunately, at 4.2sqm, the chandelier fell exactly between two of these beams. Had the design been even slightly larger or smaller, it would have been uninstallable. "We didn't know that beforehand," shrugs Ronan. Despite the slight frustration in his voice, he looks relieved. The three year project has come to a beautiful end. ●

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The film mentioned in this piece is now re-edited and available to view on disegnodaily.com.

> in the chandelier for both practical and emotional reasons - as Erwan puts it, "I think crystal within the confines of a palace brings a kind of comfort" - the

necklace grew out of research for the chandelier is telling; references to bodily decoration in Lustre Gabriel are difficult to ignore. "A necklace is built around this

"We would have loved to have kept the door open - I mean, we spend our life fine-tuning things, but here fine-tuning was impossible."

bell shape of each of the pearls in the necklace is retained, albeit elongated, in Lustre Gabriel. In the necklace, each bead tightly cups its neighbour, hiding the structure that holds them together. The same holds true for Lustre Gabriel, although the clear-cut crystal lets you see more of the structure. That the

question of how to be strong enough to sustain wear, but still soft enough to interact with the body and generate a very natural gravity and shape," says Ronan. Yet both brothers insist that they did not design the shape of the chandelier, only the shape of its components. "It's not a shape that we designed - well, we built it, but it's a natural

Opposite and this page:
Lustre Gabriel was
made from 800 specially
designed crystal
components threaded
around a stainless steel
skeleton containing
LED lighting.

