Divide and Conquer
HOW A SEAWEED-INSPIRED SCREEN BECAME A RUNAWAY HIT.

Every so often a designer comes up with something so appealing to so many people that it becomes a best seller. Jasper Morrison’s pearly glass Glo-Ball light, in the shape of a beach ball, was one. Philippe Starck’s Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, which looked as if it had landed from another planet, was another. Never mind that it squirted lemon juice over anyone rash enough to actually use it.

Now it’s the turn of a spindly piece of plastic, 10 inches wide and a little more than 12 inches long. It resembles a twig, one sprouting lots of skinny shoots, and it’s called Algue, after the French word for seaweed, because it looks like that too. Designed by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for the Swiss furniture manufacturer Vitra, the pieces can be joined together to make screens or frizzles. More than three million units of Algue have been sold in the five years since its debut.

Why such a hit? It’s not the price. At $35 for a pack of six, Algue isn’t exactly cheap. Ronan Bouroullec, the elder of the two brothers, doesn’t pretend to understand its appeal. “Algue is a mystery,” he said with a laugh. “We were pleased but surprised that everyone was so enthusiastic about it when we designed it. And we are pleased but surprised that it has sold so well. But we don’t know why.”

Let’s try. Design objects like Algue generally strike a chord if they create a look that happens to be desirable at a particular time. With Starck’s lemon squeezer, it was the “I’m hip to postmodernism but insecure enough to need everyone to know it” early-1990s vibe. Almost a decade later, Morrison’s lights struck a fashionably futuristic note for all of those people who couldn’t afford to hire Marc Newson to turn their lofts into space pods but could spare a few hundred bucks to treat themselves to a glowing sci-fi ball.

As for Algue, once you join the pieces together they create something that seems to float through the room like a vine or a cloud. The effect is naturalistic but also technological. The Bouroullec set out to design a transparent screen that people could make in whatever size or shape they wished. They did so by using advanced software to produce a single piece of plastic, which could multiply indefinitely. “It was a mathematical exercise to create perfect points of connection,” Ronan recalled. “It was only by chance — a lucky chance — that the result looked like seaweed.”

Lucky, too, that naturalism and technology are a seductive package right now. Perhaps we’re bored by slick futurism or desperate for things that seem meaningful in a scary era. Maybe it’s a bit of both. But by floating Algue across our homes, we’re saying, “I’m over superficial styling and into serious stuff that matters, like science and nature.”