BY JODY ELPHICK

FUTURE THOUGHTS

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

MIT RESEARCH FELLOW NERI OXMAN'S WORK BLURS THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SCIENCE AND ART. THE RESULT? A CHAIR THAT HUGS THE BODY, WALLS THAT MORPH INTO WINDOWS AND GLOVES FOR PEOPLE WITH CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

Oxman's 'Raycounting', part of MoMA's permanent collection, generates three-dimensional replicas of objects by measuring the orientation and intensity of light rays

ON THE MODERNIST WAY

Both of my parents are architects educated in the modernist tradition. I was a blessed rebel in a sense, because they have always supported me in my own journey to consider a new language of form. From early on it was always about questioning. What is our relationship with technology? Does technology serve theory or can it help us reinvent it? The legacy of the modernists celebrated the beauty of the machine and its ability to promote repetition and standardisation. Today we can move towards customisation.

ON A LIFE OF CONTRASTS

I underwent a design-driven upbringing before arriving at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where I was able to put my vision into practice. Having just arrived from the Architectural Association in London, which nurtured my dreams to make things differently, my world expanded overnight. Medical school was yet another significant time in my life. I still find myself going back to the human body and a systemic approach to design.

ON HER HEROES

Frei Otto was an architect and engineer who shared his vision with an anatomist and a biologist. He established an institute based on the idea that form is not made but found, and should be respected as a product of the application of forces on a material. He has had an immense impact on the way I think.

ON BUILDING FOR TOMORROW

In traditional architectural practice we tend to separate between the structural elements of the building, made of steel or concrete, and the environmental elements of the building, generally made of glass. With monocoque ['single shell'] I've attempted to invent a construction method that integrates structure and skin, such that one can vary the amount of supportive skin relative to the amount of structure. In a sense, you're not designing a product; you're designing a process.

ON INSPIRATION AND MOTIVATION

Philosophies do not simply emerge out of an intellectual vacuum; they are nurtured by forms of observation. In my case, many of my ideas come to me as I observe nature. Design, for me, involves multiple scales of translation: speaking in several languages – art, design and technology – while applying one design approach to each. Without integration and the ability to translate one's thoughts from a technical treatise to an art project to a design product, it's very difficult to see the big picture. □

materialecology.com

'PHILOSOPHIES DO NOT SIMPLY EMERGE OUT OF AN INTELLECTUAL VACUUM; THEY ARE NURTURED BY FORMS OF OBSERVATION'

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF NERI OXMAN/MOMA; © TOM ALLEN.