

Dynamic

WITH CLIENTS INCLUDING AUDI AND WARNER BROS, CONTROVENTO IS ON A CRUSADE TO DEMOCRATISE DESIGN

Controvento

BY MARIANNA GIUSTI



I don't think this guy likes me," Verdiana Vannini thought when she first met Gabriele Chiave. It was 2017 and Chiave was interviewing her for a job at the Amsterdam headquarters of Marcel Wanders, a light-filled canalside space in the city's leafy Plantage district. The prospect of working for Wanders, who shot to fame in the 1990s when his Knotted Chair became a modern classic, was a big deal for Vannini. The New York Times had called him "the Lady Gaga of Design".

But sitting across from Chiave was intimidating. Personally scouted by Wanders in Milan a decade before, he had become the industry's new darling for his work on designs such as the Louis Vuitton modular lounge chair and the Alessi Circus collection. In the hours after her interview, drinking with Chiave and some of his colleagues at a floating bar on the Johan van Hasseltkanaal, Vannini changed her mind about him. After all, he'd just given her the job.

"Maybe I was a little 'drama-queen-Italian-diva'?" says Chiave. The two Italians are speaking to me on a video call from their respective offices: he in New York, she in Amsterdam. They begin to giggle. But, Chiave says, "We ended up partners. Look at that!"

In October 2022, after working together at Marcel Wanders for four years, Chiave and Vannini set up their own, Controvento (Italian for "against the wind"). Their aim was to push boundaries in design but also to challenge what they refer to as the industry's "star designer" culture. The ambition was rooted in personal experience. Working at a big-name design house had brought the pair to the top of their profession but over time it made them question whether there was another way to do things. "Design is by definition democratic," says Chiave. "It's teamwork."

On my screen, Chiave and Vannini appear as two talking heads mixing English and Italian seamlessly, with occasional slips into French for design jargon. Vannini has perfectly straightened, shiny auburn hair and impeccably applied maroon lipstick. Her background shows a shelving unit with neatly organised files and display objects. Chiave wears a dark T-shirt that shows the small geometric tattoos on his forearms. He has a

habit of running his fingers, adorned with chunky silver rings, through his hair. In the sparse space behind him, I can see half-opened boxes and iron cabinet drawers.

Their roles, like their temperaments, appear complementary. Vannini is Controvento's business mind, at the helm of all commercial operations and strategy. She tells me how she once negotiated a 50 per cent fee increase for one of her designers during a five-minute phone call. She also admits she can only go to bed after she's answered all emails and messages from the day. Chiave is uninterested in tasks outside the creative remit. He sketches wherever he is, he says, including while riding the subway. When I ask if they ever get into arguments, Chiave turns his camera off and pretends to leave the call. "She's one of the few who can handle my drama," he jokes. Vannini smiles and nods slyly.

The early fruits of this partnership have been intriguingly eclectic. Controvento's client list includes Audi - for whom they designed an imposing mirrored circular installation at last year's Salone del Mobile - and the luxury home decor and lifestyle group Fendi Casa. For this year's Salone, Controvento will unveil Warner Bros' first interiors collection, designed for Formitalia and titled Wayne Enterprises after Bruce Wayne, the fictional CEO who leads a nocturnal double life as Batman.

"There is a bit of patina of darkness to our collection," Chiave says as he shows me his sketches on his screen. In the *Batman* movies, interiors are one way Wayne's duality is emphasised. The billionaire philanthropist's mansion and boardroom are refined and luxurious, whereas his alter-ego's Batcave is a functional, industrial, albeit increasingly hi-tech space. The new pieces hint at this polarity without spelling it out, says Chiave.

The collection's allusions to Bruce Wayne's secret life are subtle yet effective. Tall armchairs, which at first glance appear like a spin on the famed 1960s space-age egg chair, also evoke a sleeping bat, hanging upside down, sheathed in its own long, folded wings. A long V-shaped fissure, which cuts dramatically through the backrest when seen from the front, reveals the silhouette of Batman's distinctive mask. Handblown crystal pendant lights look like suspended Warner Bros logos - but also small flying bats. A coffee table,





made from a long chunky slab of black marble with thin white veins, features a brass magazine holder shaped like a “W” – a nod to the Wayne Enterprises logo. All are price on application. They then show me a large carpet which bears a grey and black print of a city map. “If you walk on it, you’re standing in Gotham without knowing it,” Chiave says, as excited as a kid with a new Batmobile.

On April 1 2022, employees at Marcel Wanders in Amsterdam were informed by the Dutch designer that it would “freeze operations” after more than three decades, closing indefinitely. (A smaller brand Moooi remains.) “That day was the worst,” says Chiave. “I was crying like a baby. Marcel always was my master and my friend,” he adds. “I grew to be who I am thanks to him and not anybody else.”

Not long afterwards, Wanders told the Dezeen website, “I have been feeling a sense of dissatisfaction and an urgency inside myself to change something in my creative life and process.” The announcement itself came just months after he had been involved in a serious car accident at the end of 2021.

The news that one of the world’s most influential designers planned to “do less” sent shockwaves through the industry. However, Chiave and Vannini claim that from 2019 Wanders had been increasingly absent from the studio he ran, and by extension from the day-to-day running. In a statement, Moooi said: “Marcel Wanders was – and is – a business owner that has always had more responsibilities than just the ones in his design studio.”

That studio continued to deliver ambitious, high-profile projects. In 2021, it launched its design of the VIP centre at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, a large ensemble of spaces juxtaposing textiles with 17th-century Dutch motifs and surrealist lighting. Months later, Louis Vuitton unveiled its Miami store, with a sculptural, bone-white façade – dubbed the Diamond Facade – whose pattern was designed by the Wanders studio as a nod to the house’s leatherwork. But by 2021, Chiave was giving serious consideration to leaving. He had received a job offer from New York and, after 15 years, was frustrated at what he saw as a lack of recognition from Wanders, who he claims hadn’t

ABOVE: CONTROVENTO’S FENDI F-AFFAIR, A MODULAR SOFA MADE UP OF INTERLOCKING “F” SHAPES.

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE BATMAN-THEMED CHAIR FOR WARNER BROS

followed through on discussions they’d had about a partnership. “I loved my work, my clients, my team, but I didn’t see any partnership coming,” he says. In a statement, Moooi said Chiave’s role as “co-creative director” made him second in command at the studio. “At some point Marcel and Gabriele spoke about a partnership for Gabriele but in the end they did not come to an agreement.”

By the time Wanders announced the studio closure, Chiave had agreed to join Estée Lauder in New York, where he still works today. Vannini, who did not have a job lined up, was crushed by Wanders’ announcement. In the space of five years she had gone from covering a short maternity leave to overseeing three design departments, more than 40 projects at a time and joining the management team. Even though the world was coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, the job market languished. What would she do?

Chiave had watched her career rise rapidly since she arrived. Their working relationship had been smooth from the start. In time, they became friends and when the company closed, decided to stick together. Equal partners in Controvento, they want to apply lessons they have learnt. “We want to make sure that the designers who work with us are fully recognised,” says Vannini.

It’s common in the design world for designers to be paid a fixed rate while the studio receives royalties from the sales of the product. Individual designers’ names are generally not disclosed on press releases or websites, regardless of the significance of their input. By contrast Controvento pays a percentage of royalties to all lead designers who’ve contributed creatively to a project and also credits them. The Warner Bros collection was the work

of two designers, for example. “It’s the studio’s collective intelligence that makes projects successful, not the singular individual,” says Chiave. “Otherwise we’d be making art, not design.”

They favour a studio model that is flexible and global: designers are located in places as diverse as Warsaw, the Algarve, Treviso and Paris. “Life is not work!” says Chiave. “Let people work where they love, where they have family, where they can enjoy the beach!”

Chiave and Vannini both studied design in Milan, but took different routes to get there. Vannini grew up in Aulla, a small village in the northern Tuscan hills. Chiave was raised by diplomat parents between Venezuela, Senegal and the Middle East. As a child, Vannini compulsively rearranged the furniture and decor of the Barbie house she shared with her two sisters (“They didn’t get it!”). Chiave’s origin story is rather darker. As a teenager living in Syria, he took part in a dig in the Euphrates Valley where the archeologists found a whole house, dating back to 2,000BC, in which the remains of an entire family, including their dog, were recovered, buried side by side. During the dig Chiave unearthed a terracotta vase, cracked yet perfectly preserved. It had two elegant, rounded handles, bore a scratch on one side – and contained the four-millennia-old skeleton of a child. Undaunted, he recalls how he felt the urge to create “the archeology of the future”. In that moment he realised he wanted to be a designer.

At Salone 2024 Controvento will also present new designs for Fendi Casa. The Italian furniture brand is, with Audi, one of the former Marcel Wanders clients that have continued working with Chiave and Vannini following the closure of the Wanders studio. (Other names will remain under embargo until collections have launched.) The Fendi Casa collection includes Blow Up, a large modular sofa made of stacked tiramisu-like layers, lovingly called “pequins” by Chiave in a convincing French accent. Pequins (literally “small peppers”) are the visual units that make up Fendi’s historic motif. Originally used to create a striped pattern in alternating colours, they were later woven together in a puzzle-like ensemble which evolved into the house’s interlocking “F”s, one of fashion’s most recognisable designs.

This particular sofa’s pequins are adorned with built-in metal bands, which can be made to slide on and off the seats and armrests as functional tray tables. These, Chiave and Vannini tell me, were inspired by the gold “bracciali” bangles worn by fashion models on the Fendi runway over the years. “We put jewels on our sofas,” Chiave says, only half joking. Another sofa design for the same client will feature the brand’s double “F”s distorted in softer, mellower forms – a playful twist on the logo which, to me, makes the pequins look like melting marshmallows in a Dalí painting. Or revellers entwined in an embrace. Fittingly, it’s called Fendi F affair.

Before we go, Chiave has something else to show me. It’s the company’s new, animated logo with “Controvento” spelled in capital letters, and the “T”s shaped like arrows. It reminds me of the windex at the top of a sailing boat’s mast. Presently the arrows spin, and one of them stops upside down. Pointing to the image, Chiave says. “This is me with my head in the clouds,” he says. “And this is Verdiana, with her feet on the ground.” **FT**