

Personal Chemistry

DAVID EDWARDS

A 21st century da Vinci perfects a formula that's equal parts creative process and scientific experiment
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Photos by Vincent Ferrané



VOLUTE POLLUTE: Founder David Edwards, against Franc Rezzak's in-situ drawings, illustrating the pollution that can be absorbed by designer Mathieu Lehanneur's Bel-Air filtration system



The paint was still drying the day Le Laboratoire opened its doors in Paris last October, less a sign of schedule delays or poor planning than of the gallery's commitment to remaining a permanent work in progress. Only 24 hours prior to the debut of his exhibit, "Food for Thought," an artistic interpretation of stem cell transformation, French artist Fabrice Hyber decided to paint the floors, forcing the first crop of visitors to step carefully around viscous blue puddles.

Every aspect of Le Laboratoire illustrates that it's both a place for experimentation and an experiment itself. Founded by 46-year-old American scientist and Harvard professor David Edwards, the center is dedicated to the practice of "artscience," what Edwards describes as "a fusion of two creative processes, one aesthetic

"Le Laboratoire is both a place for experimentation and an experiment itself"

— the basis of what we define as art — and the other analytical or scientific." The space brings together collaborators from the two worlds (Hyber, for example, worked with MIT scientist Robert Langer on the inaugural show), and exhibits the results of their experiments, promoting and presenting the kind of cross-exploration that typified the breakthroughs of masterminds like Leonardo da Vinci, Louis Pasteur and Steve Jobs. Le Laboratoire plans to produce four distinct projects per year, focusing on culture, education, humanitarianism and industry respectively. Participants over the next two seasons will include the avant-garde chef Thierry Marx, photographer James Nachtwey, designer Hussein Chalayan and architect François Roche. "The challenge is to conduct experiments that are inherently interesting to the worlds of both art and science," says Edwards, "and to perform at such a high level that you're provoking both ends of the spectrum."

Privately funded, which is rare for a cultural space in France, Le Laboratoire, receives the bulk of its budget from Edwards himself, a self-described "theoretical kind of guy," with curly shoulder-length hair and a perfectly manicured two-day beard. Edwards came into his fortune in 1999 after selling a medical instrument start-up built around an inhaled insulin delivery system he invented. "I suddenly had a lot of money, and probably felt guilty about it — and excited, and nervous," he admits. "It was very strange."

While other men might have splurged on a yacht, Edwards bought a 14,000-square-foot building in central Paris, steps from the Louvre. Formerly a printing press, then a

TV studio, the mostly below-ground building was in what Edwards calls a "nightmarish state," divided into innumerable tiny cubicles. He turned to architect Peter Rose, best known for Montreal's Canadian Center for Architecture, who pulled down the walls and exposed the massive limestone foundation and riveted steel beams. With its high ceilings and open staircases, the interior now has a vast, industrial feel, especially in the main exhibition area. At street level, the classic Haussmannian facade features three large windows and an LED sign from light artist Bill Bell that flashes subliminal messages.

Edwards also took part in one of the inaugural projects, collaborating with Mathieu Lehanneur, a French designer whose previous imaginative undertakings included a new medicinal concept in which antibiotics are delivered in an onion-shaped form, each layer containing a discrete dose. Frustrated by the indifference to the project shown by pharmaceutical labs, Lehanneur was interested in learning more about Edwards' artscience approach. "Until collaborating with Le Laboratoire," Lehanneur observes, "I never had access to in-depth scientific research and was confined to speculation and simplified information."

Starting in late 2006, the two men began experimenting with different plants in order to develop an air filter that removes what Lehanneur terms the "undesirable effects of design" on our habitats, such as so-called "toxic ghosts" released from paint, plastics and the like. Using a study conducted by NASA, they came up with a filter, dubbed the Bel-Air, that vaguely resembles a food processor with a plant inside.

Five slightly different prototypes were exhibited at Le Laboratoire, alongside a digital animation showing acid-colored balls of pollution emanating from households in the whimsical forms of rocking horses and carpets. Smitten visitors can buy one of these prototypes for upwards of 13,000 euros at the LaboShop, an onsite boutique which Edwards sees "as an incubator for interesting products with commercial value," that also happens to sell T-shirts and catalogs.

As part of the ongoing development of the Bel-Air, gallery visitors are asked to fill out a survey with questions such as, "When was the building in which you live/work built?" and "Do you have any plastic furniture?" In addition, Le Laboratoire has facilitated the application process for an international patent, a somewhat arduous task that is difficult for independent designers like Lehanneur to manage on their own. If the filter is ever mass-produced, the duo will share the profits, another rare boon for industrial designers.

And while at times it seems that Edwards is flying by the seat of his pants, he claims the experimental nature of Le Laboratoire is also the core of its appeal. "Artscience is in essence a process," he says. "And creative people love those moments when they're hanging on the edge of a cliff." ■

ART PRODUCE: A vegetable sculpture from "Food for Thought," the inaugural exhibition of artist Fabrice Hyber at Le Laboratoire

