

The Power of Initiative

By Benjamin Loyauté, curator of the *Ndao Hanavao* project, 2019

When designers and engineers Christophe Machet and Émile De Visscher decided to get involved over a year ago in the titanic project devised by Rubis Mécénat cultural fund, they were becoming a part of the first social design project to be developed in Madagascar. This island, which boasts the world's most complex ecosystem, is dealing with unprecedented plastic pollution, and caterpillars have even been discovered there which feed on polyethylene.

Rubis Mécénat, which is active in developing countries, decided to work in Madagascar by establishing a local research and community action laboratory offering young adults an education and training programme in design, which is tailored to the local economy. Located in Antananarivo, this innovation and creative "lab" draws on input from guest designers, artisans, engineers and other local stakeholders in order to find viable long-term solutions focusing on object design in response to problems in Malagasy society.

By inviting two inventors to transplant and adapt their Polyfloss Factory, which offers a new recycling process for plastics on a human scale, Rubis Mécénat aims to provide the starting point for the project *Ndao Hanavao*, "let's innovate".

From dream to tangible initiative, from initial resolve to powerful reality, the project designs waste recycling solutions for making essential commodities and creative items, offering "a short economic cycle aimed at and led by Malagasy people, which is sustainable for the long-term." Émile De Visscher and Christophe Machet are addressing the issue of tools for emancipation. The *Ndao Hanavao* laboratory is hosting the Polyfloss Factory to launch an approach to fabrication based on the premise that waste is a significant resource in the city and that it is essential to treat it locally.

The Polyfloss process produces a recycled "candy floss" wool which can be knitted, shaped or melted back down indefinitely. Rolling the process out and reinventing it in Madagascar engages

with the reality of plastic pollution faced by the Malagasy population.

Getting to the heart of the ecological issue means focusing on the tools and facilities which need to be introduced and also involves thinking about short-cycle manufacturing. The two designers have therefore embraced the gamble of living in an action-focused society with more powerful convictions than a word-based society in which comfortable verbal commitments are often associated with abandonment of and disengagement from the act of fabrication. Christophe Machet and Emile de Visscher are therefore fostering an ecology of thought and action.

Without turning its back on contemporary formal usages and issues, *Ndao Hanavao* is establishing an economy of care, which reaches out to other cultures in a more interpersonal way, with a focus on actions.

Design practice is a social issue. Without actually articulating it or declaring it outright, the two designers belong to a group of creators who are investing in the future. They have forged a creative dynamic around upcycling which, in a period of high creativity and intensive manufacturing, eschews the normative and ephemeral notion of fashion systems which also want to be a part of this, but often fail to move beyond the immediacy of the design stage and a very well-honed communications message.

Ndao Hanavao is shaped from end to end around pragmatic and life-changing approaches. It dreams about what is possible, fosters vocations, offers professional prospects, and allows talent to express itself. It is also necessary to address the issue of raising the profile of expertise, of helping Malagasy artists to interact by making their names known and training young people, as outlined by Carine Ratovonarivo, who is responsible for developing the educational element of the project. This is the crux, the true power and resilience of the “power of initiative” which Rubis Mécénat cultural fund has initiated with a country and its people. The aim is to release creative ability via education and to promote the skills of Malagasy creators and entrepreneurs of the future.

Through its commitment to creating a research and application laboratory and forging a human venture for the long term, Rubis Mécénat is developing a new model. This is all too rare, and the two designers involved are committed by their actions and behaviours to creating a collective model; this is a game changer because the aim is to serve others and respond to social needs. People who shape the new world, however small their contribution, are embracing a can-do ideal, relegating words to the realm of static attributes.

Even when we are alerted to the consequences of our decisions, we very often decide to continue to ignore them. Information is no longer

enough, it is absorbed and discarded as quickly as an advertising insert, as if we were admitting both our own impotence faced with our consumption and our rationale for the damage we cause.

By recycling plastic in an innovative way, and integrating what is usually an industrial material into the realm of artisan re-creation, the Polyfloss Factory positions itself as a tangible, exploratory, fun and collaborative response to the pollution caused by the city's waste. For over a year now, the two designers and the team established in situ have been assessing, analysing and identifying a range of available sources of plastic waste, in order to evaluate requirements and understand habits and lifestyles by looking at actual use. This data has made it possible to "assess the market and to identify appropriate applications" which *Ndao Hanavao* is embracing today.

Looking beyond the purely geographical zone in which we must recognise our global responsibility, we must ask ourselves whether consumerism has in fact become a rejection of this responsibility. Has it negated our ability as adults to move forward in a new way, to produce differently and to invent paths offering an alternative to the creative destruction and anthropocentrism whose repercussions have been to fuel man's ego and power?

Perhaps we can also change model and revisit the idea of progress,

thus affording it a raft of permanent benefits in which Polyfloss finds its place.

Time has shown that there is no looking backwards in design, technology and science – there is simply a multitude of paths to follow in order to create the present of tomorrow. To discern the best path, as scientist Joël de Rosnay emphasises in his book *Surfer la vie: Comment survivre dans la société fluide*, we need to "build the future together, to survive the complexity of the modern world and its acceleration." Becoming part of a "fluid society" allows us to be aware of our environment and to respect nature. People in homeostasis – the ability to regulate some of our physiological constants to reflect variations in our external environment – would therefore be able to surf the tallest waves and aim ever higher.

Ndao Hanavao!