

ALCANTARA

The material of art

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PREFACE: ALCANTARA AND ART

Ever since the beginning of its history, Alcantara has collaborated positively with designers and creatives from all over the world, in the widest ranging design fields. Subsequently, in 2006/2007, the company adopted a highly proactive role in relations with artists, seeing the potential for developing a dialogue to seek new forms of expression and possibilities of applying them.

The earliest collaborations immediately highlighted the valuable nature of a unique and extremely versatile material, which, as well as having unquestionable functional properties, is also an endless source of inspiration. A material that has the ability to “speak an infinite number of languages”, continually reinventing itself, and always becoming “whatever you want it to be”.

Accordingly, the close dialogue between Alcantara and Art has driven a process of continual experimentation, which, over the years, has enabled us to explore, and go beyond, the boundaries of the material: Alcantara does not restrict itself to dressing vision, but generates it.

In the same period, the Company came to the belief that the international market it looks to would express more and more clearly a growing demand for products capable of combining functionality and technological qualities with aesthetic and sensory values, and that an even greater demand for personalization would emerge in this context.

Thus, there was a growing conviction that successful products cannot simply be represented by a list of technical specifications, but should be capable of connecting emotionally with the consumer.

The relationship with art, through a mutual process of giving and receiving inspiration, has become a strategic aspect that has allowed

Alcantara's potential to explode in its many and varied forms and functions, also to meet the demand of the most sophisticated and exacting sector of the market.

This has led Alcantara to systematically step up its relations with the art world at the international level, developing highly-productive collaborations with prestigious museums and galleries, and countless artists, be they icons or young talents, from the most diverse cultures. The Alcantara material has become an integral part of the creative process: the "medium" via which the artist expresses his/her creativity.

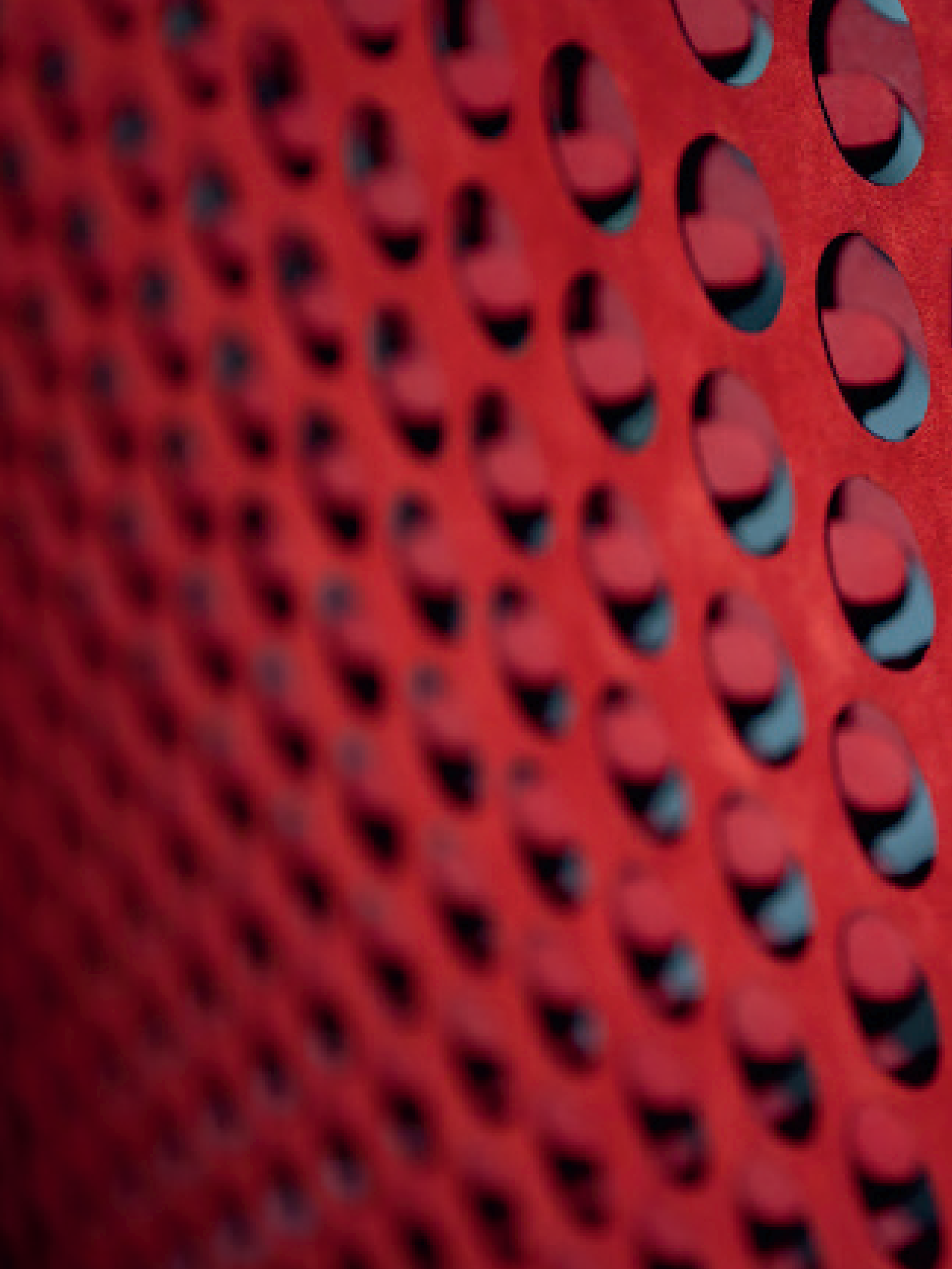
In this context, the now more than a decade-long collaboration with the MAXXI in Rome, the museum with which we have developed a new model of artistic co-production, is emblematic. It is also significant that all the works created with Alcantara are now in the MAXXI's permanent collection.

In line with this vision, Alcantara has gone beyond the traditional forms of sponsorship and patronage, establishing new relations with creatives, curators and institutions, based on the development of joint research projects. These initiatives have become powerful generators of innovation, creative experimentation and constant research on material.

This book documents Alcantara's activities in the world of the arts: a long-running journey where every goal is also a point of departure towards new horizons to be explored, new limits to be overcome.

Andrea Boragno

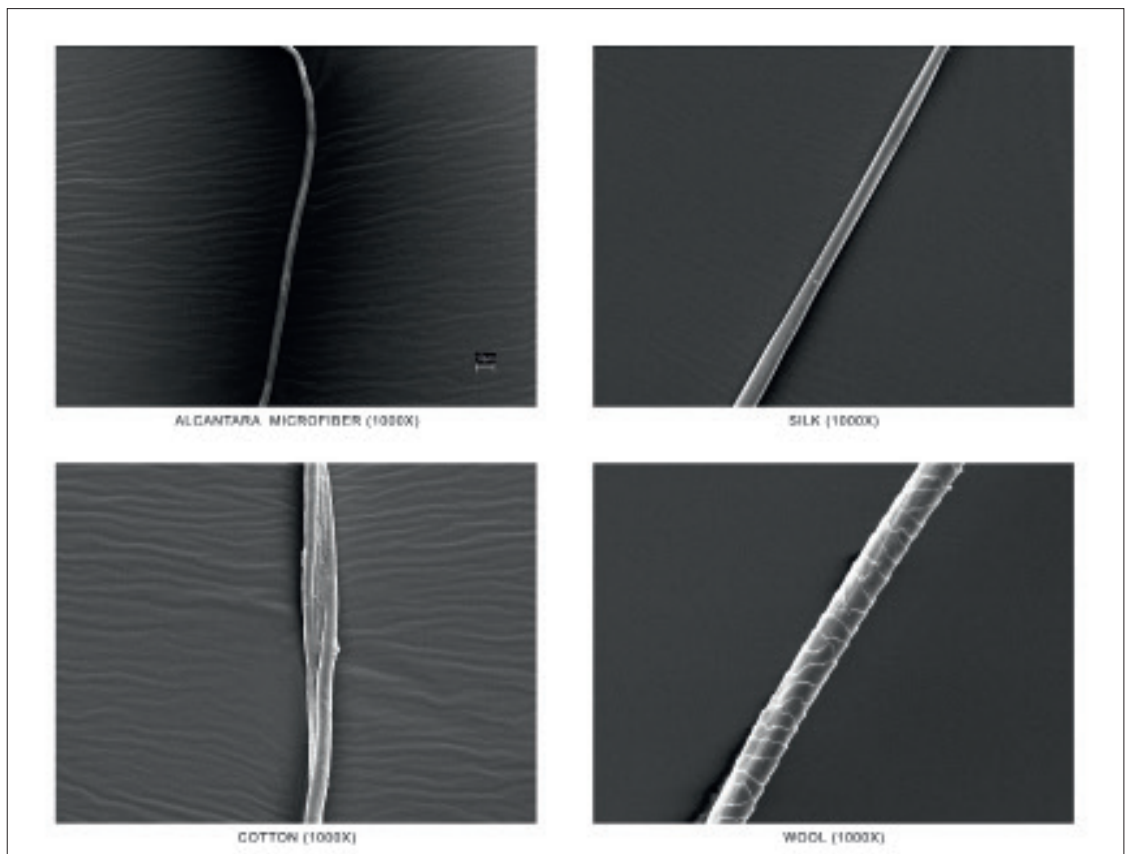




ISLANDS IN THE SEA

The key is not to be intimidated. It takes nerve to lift your gaze to the skies and watch the flight of the first spaceship. Mankind closed ranks and tried to get inside Yuri Gagarin's Vostok 1. The Russian cosmonaut's orange suit seemed way too big for him; he watched from above while we followed him from below, in our mind's eye. We were so very small, but what we were doing was so much bigger. For the first time man had detached his shadow from the ground, and was flying beyond the atmosphere. A historic journey, in the spring of 1961.

Alcantara under an electron microscope



The journey around the earth's orbit lasted as long as a soccer game, with a few minutes of extra time. Just long enough to say things that will remain in the collective memory. For example: "The sky is black along the edge of the Earth; near the horizon there is a beautiful deep blue aureole". Yuri Gagarin saw the planet as blue, and from that moment on we all started to say it was blue, like a great sea with a few islands in between. It must have been mind-blowing to see the Earth without borders. For the first time, after a couple of million years.

Around the same time, in Japan, a young research chemist graduated from the University of Nagoya. His name was Miyoshi Okamoto, and he was a genius. He was immediately hired by Toray, a company that was full of geniuses. For one thing, they had invented Rayon, the fibre derived from cellulose that looks like a transparent natural silk. The laboratory was on the island of Shikoku, in the western part of the country. Okamoto's job was to work on the materials of the future: acrylic and polyester. The young researcher also began a journey into space, but the infinitesimal space of the molecules of new synthetic fibres. It is not difficult to imagine him gazing downwards, eye glued to his microscope, while the rest of humanity was looking upwards, in the direction of the US spaceships that were approaching the Moon.

Okamoto invented new materials, he became a celebrity in his field, and at the end of the 1960s he created a kind of chamois leather that he thought could be used for shoe uppers. A type of calfskin, pleasing to the touch, soft and velvety. Highly resistant, flexible, and waterproof.

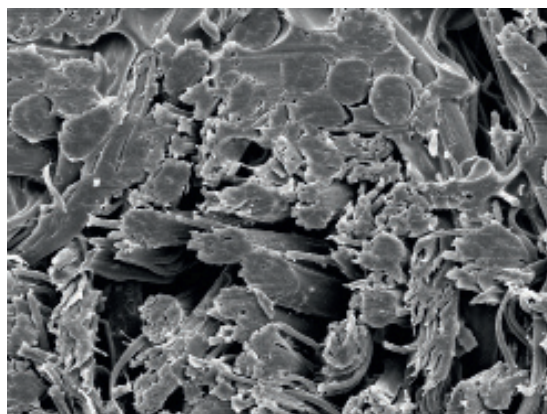
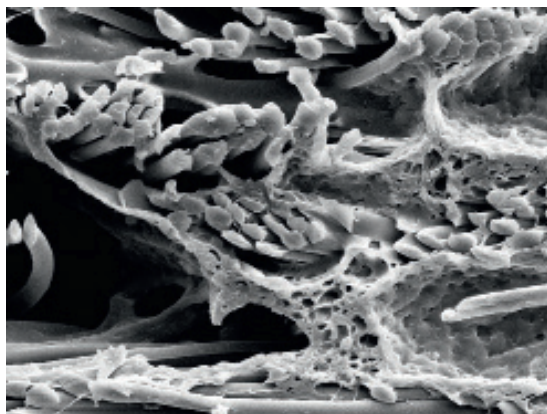
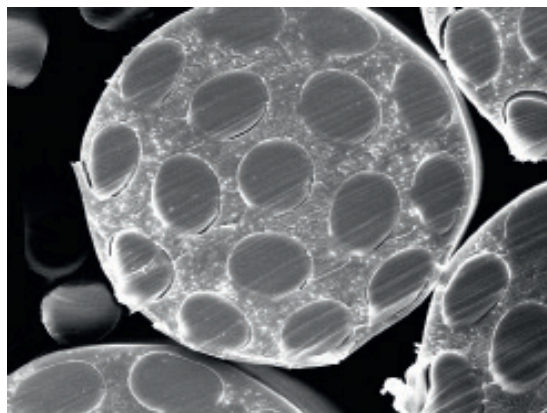
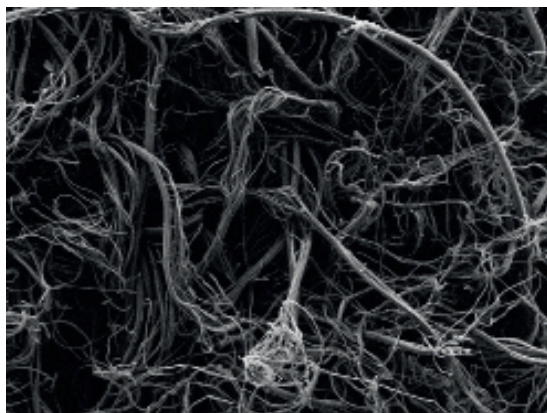
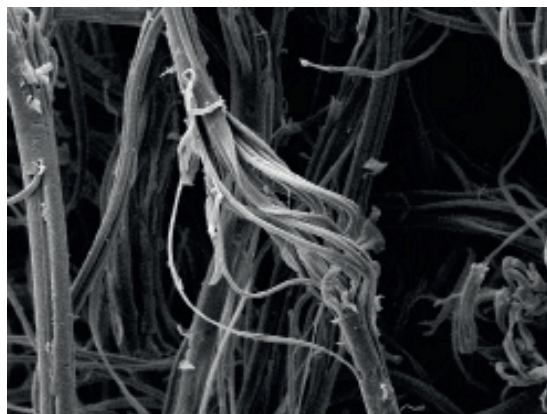
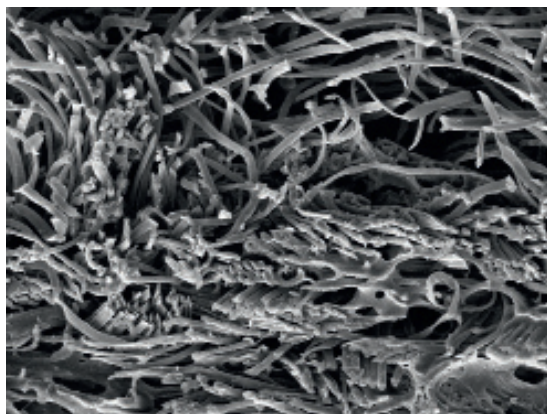
Okamoto must have been a poet, too, because when they asked him to describe the new material, he said that it looked like a cluster of "islands in the sea". It was not a woven material, there was no weft or warp, only interwoven synthetic fibres. Under the microscope they really did look like islands in the sea.

The research went on, and when the time came to give the material a name, people thought about how to connect those islands in the sea together. *Al-Quantarah* is the Arabic term meaning "bridge". That would be the name of the new material: Alcantara. The first patents were filed in 1970. Now, after water, air, earth and fire, there was Alcantara. It seemed like a new element, created by man.

To produce the Alcantara material, the Japanese met up with the Italians. An industrial plant as big as a town sprang up at Nera Montoro, near Terni: a small world built around a complex manufacturing process where extremely high-quality artisanal and industrial procedures were carried out: long sequences of secret operations, covered by patents.

It all seemed like magic, but it was industry, in the service of research and creativity. Alcantara is a versatile, malleable material, able to give personality and character to an endless variety of design solutions. To make things simple, we could say that it was just a covering. But this is too generic

Alcantara under an
electron microscope



and reductive a term, because Alcantara is a material that becomes whatever you want it to become. The 1970s and 1980s were the golden age for Japan's economy, and also for Italian style. Fashion discovered Alcantara, followed by interior design and the automotive industry. These were years of great successes. Alcantara became synonymous with beautiful, refined, exclusive. Italian.

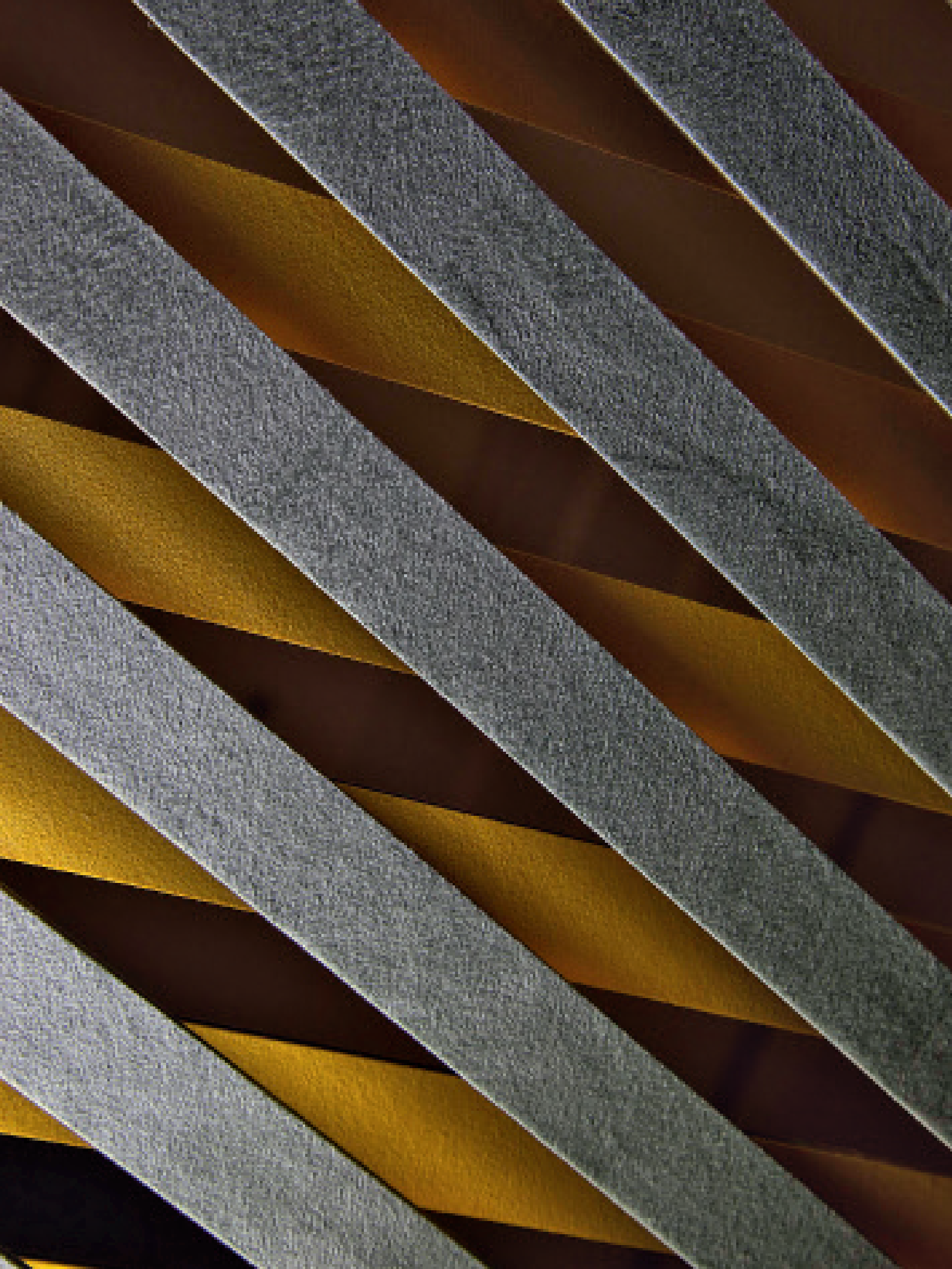
In order to understand a material like Alcantara, you must learn how to see the islands in the sea – as Okamoto did in the 1960s. Alcantara is an alphabet: it contains combinations of letters forming sentences, and whole languages, which make it possible to convey emotions. Alcantara is elegant and soft to the touch, cool, waterproof, and resistant to twisting and tearing. It is receptive to light and sound friendly; you can print on it in very high

resolution, like photographic paper, and it can be painted on like a canvas. When you look at it, it has two dimensions, but as soon as you touch it you perceive a third. A depth that exists even before the material is used to cover objects. Alcantara speaks and says much about us, through the places it furnishes, the things it clothes.

In the early years of the new millennium, the company experienced a radical shift. A new leap forward, triggered by profound self-reflection and examination of its values. Taking a step back, in order to go a long way forward: like an athlete's run-up. In 2004, as part of a strategy to reposition and strengthen the brand, the new Managing Director, Andrea Boragno, decided to focus on Alcantara's uniqueness and its potential for infinite possibilities of expression and application. Relations with the art world became the generator of a process of constant innovation and experimentation. Alcantara chose to inhabit the landscapes of art, innovation and research. To stimulate creative thoughts and enable their exchange, like a bridge between ideas.

Thus, began a process aimed at forging an identity. More than 10 years of research in the fields of design, the performing arts, and figurative art. With a clear idea in mind: always standing alongside the artists, asking them to think in terms of Alcantara. To think and communicate in Alcantara. To then stage their narratives by collaborating with curators and museums across the world. to become cultural producers, and create something unique, something precious.

Alcantara has become the material of art: a new inner grammar for project designers, leading artists and younger talents. This book tells the story of their journeys with Alcantara. All the way to the Moon, even, to see the islands in the sea.





ARTISTS' JOURNEYS

The town stretches along the river, amidst the hills. There are houses, a long thoroughfare and side streets, various places where people's paths may cross. In actual fact, the town is one big factory containing other factories, all of them highly specialized. Each department in the Alcantara plant is responsible for one phase in the manufacturing process. Viewed overall, the production site is impressive: it expresses the strength of a vision, man's dynamism as he creates an impossible material.

Alcantara
headquarters,
Milan

Alcantara
headquarters,
Nera Montoro (TR)

Following pages
Aerial view of the
headquarters,
Nera Montoro







The entrance is low, clean-cut, and symmetrical. White walls, and decor consisting in interlinked blue tubes above. The window frames are also of the same colour, like the waters of the river that flows nearby. It is complemented by the contrasting green of the countryside all around. The light is crystal clear.

The greenery is also symmetrical: one tree on the right, one on the left; one bush on the right, one on the left. In the middle, as if trying to break up the precision of the scene, a small group of people are holding hands and dancing. They kick their legs in rhythm: first all to the right, then all to the left. They are a group of artists, they come from every corner of the globe, and they are familiar with the ages of life. They are talking intensely, exchanging ideas and thoughts.

The scene is the start of a new exhibition. Every creative project by Alcantara begins with a visit to the plant. The aim is to create a hands-on experience with the art material: to start to think in terms of Alcantara.

Beyond the entrance, a new world opens up. The factory seems like some kind of parallel universe. The artists suddenly fall silent, they observe, they listen. They walk, and begin their journey through the world of Alcantara. There is only one word for it: astonishing! This is not a textile factory, a chemicals plant, or mechanical engineering plant. It is like one of Calvino's invisible cities: a unique place that incorporates all three.

Noises become sounds: a constant, composed and orderly downbeat and up-beat: the rhythm of creation. The uniqueness of the production process, and the secrecy that enshrouds every stage of the work, lend mystery and magic to the journey. To become Alcantara, the material continually passes from one state to another. In nature we are not used to a material changing state. It is something of a puzzle, enough to drive you crazy. Something that artists are very good at.

Alcantara is a miracle of softness and lightness. Ultra-thin fibres are stretched, curled, and cut until sequences of flakes are obtained. Ninety kilometres of it weigh no more than a gram! If you look at the fibres, protected by special casings, under the microscope, you see islands in the sea. One of the artists stretches out his hand, lightly touches the Alcantara flakes, and asks if he can take one. He must have had an idea. The first of many.

Then the material is combed and carded, and distributed in very thin superimposed layers, creating a kind of mattress. The time has come for needle-punching: the fibres are interwoven using long needles, forming a compact and resistant felt.

But this is only the beginning, so make yourself comfortable. Now the textile industry steps back, and the chemical side comes to the fore. The sea that held the islands together is dried up. The felt is impregnated and then immersed in a liquid that solidifies and coagulates the raw fibres. One of the creatives points out that, while Okamoto was inventing Alcantara, Giulio Natta won the Nobel Prize for research into the chemistry of polymers.

Today, the production of Alcantara is steeped in the dimension of sustainability. Since 2009 the company has held Carbon Neutral certification, the fruit of a total commitment to reducing carbon emissions to a minimum. At the Nera Montoro plant, production is entirely fuelled by electricity obtained from renewable sources. Residual emissions are tracked and offset by reforestation plans and projects designed to protect the environment.

The raw material is then cut and treated with special abrasive papers that make it soft to the touch. When you run your finger over an Alcantara surface you'll find you can write on it, like children do on windows when they get steamed up. Sheer pleasure.

The last stage is dyeing. The department looks like a painter's studio, with endless small bottles of various colours lined up next to each other, and connected to the machinery. Finally, once tinted, the Alcantara material is dried and heat-treated to fix the colour. What colour? Every single shade that you can imagine. Researchers are always at work: every creative proposal becomes a technical and manufacturing challenge, to be met and overcome.

Visitors also observe the work of the quality control staff, who seek perfection and inspect every square inch of material. Then they go into the offices of the Research and Development Centre. There are cabinets full of Alcantara samples, of which there seem to be no two alike. The adaptable material proves capable of speaking an infinite number of languages. You study them, touch them, hold them up to your nose, finger them, then let them go. They seem to fly. You wonder: "Are they all Alcantara?"

An endless source of inspiration, the expressive potential of Alcantara knows no bounds. The same material can become anything, while remaining itself. The first comments circulate among the visiting creatives. One says: "All materials have limits, Alcantara has potential." Another adds: "Alcantara begins where other materials end."

It makes you want to create, knowing that you can do anything. You just have to imagine it.



ALCANTARA DESIGN MUSEUM

Springtime in Milan. The taxi crawls along Via Tortona in the traffic. This street used to be in the suburbs, until the last century. Along with the railway, the Naviglio canal, the industrial buildings; now it is the new fashion district. The car pulls over just before Superstudio, the image hub. There's no point in going right up to the entrance, there are too many people. The taxi-driver suggests we stop here. He knows how things work during the Salone del Mobile. The passengers are foreigners, they come from the other side of the world. They get out and allow themselves to be caught up in the crowd. But it is not confusion: the show has already begun.

Confluences sofa in embossed Alcantara by Nigro for Ligne Roset

Net-Work Alcantara sofa by Dordoni for Roda





Every year, Milan Design Week offers a wide range of events revolving around the culture of design, communication and art. Alcantara is a leader on the international scene, and in 2009 it proposed a Design Museum, the first of its kind, that grew out of the close collaboration with the curator and artistic director, Giulio Cappellini. The exhibition presented long-running research work on the material. The idea was to invite world-famous artists and designers to reinterpret objects made by important companies in the sector, using the languages of Alcantara. To think about the expressive possibilities of the material, and discover how a furnishing material can become form, and the stuff of dreams: giving new personality to things, suggesting new end uses.

Cappellini created a neutral theatrical space where designers displayed their works in Alcantara. These creators differed in terms of sign, culture, and tradition. The theatre was designed to spotlight their ideas and approaches. Different, and even opposite, perspectives, which spoke to the public through the eclectic language of a single material: Alcantara.

Matteo Thun took the stage with a glimpse of summer. He created an expanse of pale sand on the floor, then placed two pairs of flip-flops on it. The vertical flat, like a sky resting on the horizon of the sea, was made of deep blue, almost purple, Alcantara. It merged with the black

Matteo Thun and
Antonio Rodriguez,
Lido, Alcantara
Design Museum,
Milan 2009









of the walls. There was also an airy composition of Alcantara balloons, in colourful segments, resting on the sand. As light as a midsummer night's dream. One of them even floated upwards, like a hot-air balloon. You thought of *Baron Munchausen*, *The Magic Flute*, or *The Little Prince*, as you stepped sideways with a smile and immersed yourself in Patricia Urquiola's pleats. She was attracted by the possibility of folding, gathering, curling and twisting Alcantara to create textures of folds punctuated by the rhythm of lines. She chose a warm beige hue to cover a Moroso chair, making it look like something out of *Madame Butterfly*. The Alcantara folds were wrapped around the body of the armchair, the curls clustered all around, like puffs of steam. Sighs of joy. She furbished the space around the object, creating a background with the same material, which resembled a traditional Japanese interior. Red splotches forming flowers, lines and drops, stood out on the Alcantara surface. It was all very lively, but also sedate, subdued. An idea of fragile preciousness, like cherry trees in bloom.

Patricia Urquiola,
Volant, Alcantara
Design Museum,
Milan 2009







