

**‘Where does the new come from?’ An ethnography of  
design performances of ‘the new’**

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PhD in Social Anthropology  
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**Abstract**

The core concern of my thesis is with shifting the focus from the description on how innovation is done (predominantly STS accounts of innovation in-the-making) to what designers *do* with conceptions of innovation. The thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork within a group of interaction designers of Milan. Despite the different conceptions and traditions of innovation that these designers bring in – the artistic and technological ones – I observed that a design-centered conception of innovation is reproduced, as well as the idea that plans and intentions precede things. However, another key idea of my fieldwork is the importance designers give to imagining *things as they might be*, rather than focusing on *how things are*. This is where different models of action, planned and open ones coexist in creative ways: it is these processes that the ethnography details.

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**Lay Abstract**

Let us imagine two “tribes” of designers – obviously “tribes” here is an intentional exaggeration, as I am not sure if should I call them ‘types’, ‘cultures’, ‘traditions’ or ‘communities’, and anyway, this is a fictional example, so “tribes” will do. The “tribe” A) designers who create what people want/need; and the “tribe” B) designers who create what they want. These correspond to two different conceptions of innovation: A) user-centered innovation (co-design with users) and B) design-centered innovation. The question is: which “tribe” is more able to produce innovation, to generate new ideas, things that didn’t exist before? And which “tribe” is more likely to produce conservative ones? So the question is ‘where does the ‘new’ comes from? Is it from the ‘outside’ world of users or from the ‘inside’ world of designers’ intentions? This is not my question, and it is not a theoretical one either: it is an ethnographic, situated one. So my aim is not to resolve it – rather, my ethnography details how this dilemma happens in the field, situating, contextualizing and detailing how it arises as a problem within specific social relationships.

My fieldwork is based on a group of interaction designers who consider themselves part of “tribe B” – the simplification is an anecdote to outline in a few words what criteria they use to define themselves. This “tribe” has a more artistic background than the designers of the other “tribe”, and so they privilege specific models of action: they tend to prefer a more adventurous mode of action, based on improvisation of the process, intuition and unpredictability, if compared to the more ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ type of the other “tribe”. From their point of view, while in “tribe A” designers work with ‘what there is’, they, the more daring ones, work with ‘what can be’ – they work with potentialities.

The argument of this thesis is that the two “tribes” (that is, the contrast itself) correspond to two extreme ideas about innovation (two models of action), two different myths: one point of view (that of “tribe A”) concerns the idea that the new arises from the ‘outside’ (objective approach; the Science perspective) and the other view (that of the “tribe B”) is centered around the idea that the new arises from the ‘inside’ (the subjectivity of the authors’ interpretation and mental synthesis; the Arts approach). The contrast between these two views reproduces modernity. The contrast itself, which is an ethnographic one, is a reproduction of the division between mind and body – it is to those processes that my thesis refers to.

## **Declaration**

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# Introduction: innovation and the performativity of the new

The ‘sociological enchantment of innovation’ is an idea proposed by Alberto Corsín-Jiménez (2008: 22), who argues that “innovation is to the knowledge economy what adventure was to the 19th century modernism”. With Nowotny he asserts that today it is *innovation* that plays the part of social change, suggesting that the way the institutional culture of innovation is imagined today is paralleled to the modernist ‘sociological spell of adventure’: “Innovation, for Nowotny, is how modern technological society describes itself when caught up in the self-circulatory predicament of not knowing what the future will bring” (ibid: 24). My ethnography attempts to describe a sort of ‘native’<sup>1</sup> enchantment of innovation among a group of designers in Milan – a context where the ‘knowledge economy’ is particularly celebrated – analyzing how this ‘enchantment’ becomes associated with specific models of action (Suchman 1987), agency (Gell 1998) or practice (Ingold 2000). However, I shift the focus from the description on how innovation is done (predominantly STS<sup>2</sup> accounts of innovation in-the-making) to what designers *do* with conceptions of innovation. I will look at the performativity of innovation, accounting for processes where it is the production of the new, rather than just technologies gaining reality (Latour 1996), that is open, ongoing and in discussion.

## The death of hubris?

The idea of innovation as transformation, or as radical departures, is a widely accepted narrative within actor-network approaches to innovation: for example, for Latour, design is one of the terms that replaced the word “revolution” (2008: 2), which signs a post-Promethean theory of action (post-heroic, post-hubristic dream of action). Attention to detail, humility and modesty are some of the characteristics that

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘native’ in an ironic way: I am obviously aware of the connotations it has within the history of anthropology. However, my purpose is not to exoticize the people I describe, but rather to emphasize that the

<sup>2</sup> Science and Technology Studies (also known as Science, Technology and Society) is an interdisciplinary subject within social sciences that include a variety of scholars who engage with the ‘turn to technology’ or ‘turn to materiality’ – this turn is defined by the view that the ‘social’ and the ‘material’ co-produce each other.

he uses to characterize design. “To design is never to create *ex nihilo*”, he argues, since “[t]here is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem”, and thus, to design, he contends, is always to *redesign*;

“[...] I take the spread of the word design as a clear substitute for revolution and modernization [...] Designing is the antidote to founding, colonizing, establishing or breaking with the past. It is an antidote to hubris and to the search for absolute certainty, absolute beginnings, and radical departures” (ibid.:5).

Albena Yaneva, with her ethnography in Rem Koolhaas’s office, expands this view. She argues that “There is nothing novel and radical in the acts of design invention [...]. To generate a new design concept or building does not imply an *ex nihilo* creation. Instead, the stories of reuse tell us, design means to redesign.” (2009: 96).

“Design experience suggests an undertone of modesty that is never accounted for with care and respect – it does not require grand gestures of radical departure from the past, but small operations of re-collecting existing bits of projects and concepts, reusing, recycling, reinterpreting, rethinking” (ibid: 103).

These approaches to design (that look at the ‘small operations’, the routine side of innovation rather than all the ‘big’ claims of transformation) do not account for the ‘enchantment’ of innovation. In the context that I will describe, newness and radical departures from the past is the narrative that sustains what those designers in particular do, and it is a crucial part of their version of the question ‘where does the new come from’. In my view, the performativity of ‘where does the new come from?’ is an important aspect of the ‘enchantment of innovation’. My view is that ‘adventure’ is not in fact just paralleled to innovation as Jiménez suggests, but it lies on the very basis of its contemporary ‘enchantment’. Although it seems paradoxical if seen from Latour and Yaneva’s point of view (who demystify the view of design as hubristic creation), it is a specific adventurous conception of action that allows for a conception of innovation as audacious creation. One of the key ideas of my fieldwork is the importance designers give to imagining *things as they might be*, rather than focusing on *how things are*: the chapters will describe how designers enact this idea.

## **Relationships between objects and ideas/ reality and representations**

Design in Italy is associated with the fine arts, due to the fact that historically it emerged from architecture, and more recently, design education is located in the Fine Art Academies (Foot 2001; Bonomi *et al* 2006). In fact, until the 1980's – the turning point of the tertiarization process within the 'rapid rise and fall of a Fordist industrial economy'<sup>3</sup> (Foot 2003: 113), designers had an informal and autodidact way of learning – designers were usually architects. As design pedagogy became more formalized from the 1990's onwards, it became an independent area of study (Bonomi *et al*, 2006: 43). Since then there has been an increase of design schools and design courses throughout Italy, both in private and in public schools. The designers with whom I did my fieldwork, besides their connection to an Art Academy where they teach, also have a strong connection with the world of interaction design (IxD) through a now extinguished Interaction Design Institute – I explore this relationship in more detail in the following chapter, in which I introduce the Interaction-Design Studio. Thus, I found a curious mix between new media and art, and the different conceptions and traditions of innovation that they bring in – the artistic and technological ones – soon became the center of my attention. There we do not easily recognize the user-centered approaches to design (Suchman 1994b; Wilkie 2010; Wilkie & Michael 2009) that are often found in interaction design traditions, usually located in technical universities and with a much different approach towards innovation: approaches that look for problems in context, that are more 'scientific' and more modest in their approach to the new and which correspond to the ideal image of post-Promethean design that Latour talks about. In contrast, in the company where I did my fieldwork designers claim they do not design new objects, new commodities but argue that "we don't need more objects, we need stories for the existing ones", and that design is a fictional activity ('form follows fiction').

Thus, they dislocate hubris from new objects to design itself, proposing a 'new' conception of design. These are designers for whom the *new* is always in the foreground, but not because they are making new objects, but mostly because they

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<sup>3</sup>This was the end of the big industry and the rise of the post-industrial Italy. Milan was the stage where these rapid changes took place, namely regarding the fast transition from a Fordist city to a fashion and design capital (see Foot 2003: 142).

believe they are making a new kind of design. This new kind of design is described as a move from design as a problem-solving activity (the conventional definition of design) to fictions (from needs to wants), that is, to design as a narrative activity: “Generally, we think of the designer as someone who answers to a need with the appropriate solution. Example: I want to sit down (need) so the designer designs a chair (answer). In the examples we mentioned<sup>4</sup>, there is a different process at work. The designer, or the writer, shapes a question that at the time wasn’t obvious at all” (Aprile *et al* 2006: 111). These narratives about the fictional character of design are not a question of modest redesign of things, they are taken seriously as acts of creation – although not of new objects, but new persons, new professionals (designers). This ‘story’ about how ‘the new’ is brought into being is also concerned with what Sennett calls the ethos of potency that emphasizes future possibilities, what might be rather than what is, an aspect that is part of the ideology of the ‘new economy’ (2006: 156-158). This fascination with the new legitimizes conceptions of action (agency) that are not exactly those that Latour describes, but rather a conception of design agency that is located in designers. In that sense, these are design-centered approaches to innovation.

Rather than looking for problems in context, I found people who proudly insist that they *create* contexts. Or to put it differently, for these designers design is about *new* questions rather than finding answers (solutions) to practical problems or needs. Design is not a problem-solving activity, they insist, it is rather a conceptual, *critical* one.

Design as a problem-solving activity is the most common definition of design as a rational and linear sequence of actions, a means-ends strategy, which corresponds to the definition that often appears in design books. This sequence is composed by the research stage, then the concept stage, then book composition, development (trying different solutions through models or prototypes), then building/making, and finally communication (Yaneva 2009: 12-13). This conception of design as problem-solving has its origins in cognitive sciences, therefore, it corresponds to a predominantly mentalist model of action: “The planning model in cognitive science treats a plan as a sequence of actions designed to accomplish some

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<sup>4</sup> See these examples (of critical design) in the next quotation.

preconceived end. The model posits that action is a form of problem solving, where the actor's problem is to find a path from some initial state to a desired goal state, given certain conditions along the way" (Suchman 1987: 28).

Critical design<sup>5</sup>, on the other hand, is the theoretical background that is precisely concerned with thinking and developing *new questions* rather than satisfying needs:

"Critical design is generally defined as design activity that will not result in a marketable product or service, but rather in observations, prototypes and publications that express a specific worldview on societal or technological phenomena. For example, Crispin Jones designed a series of social mobiles for IDEO. One of the mobiles, for example, would hurt you if your interlocutor talked too loud; another one forced you to play a silly tune on a trumpet-like instrument before allowing you to make a call. Obviously these ideas did not make it into production, but they do force you to think about the effects of mobile telephony on the social environment" (Aprile *et al* 2006: 127).

One of the core questions of my thesis is that despite asserting that design is not a problem-solving activity, these designers do not demit the cognitivist character of the process, but rather emphasize that design is an activity that is beyond the production of practical, functional solutions. As it is evident from the above pronouncement (the book authors are the subjects of the ethnography), they do not question the underlying view of intelligence nor the status of the planning model, but rather the same mentalist operation-like model of intelligence is applied to non-commodities and therefore 'conceptual' outputs. Critical design, as much as problem-solving design, are both (although for different reasons) mentalist models of action.

The idea that designers create context and that they produce the new is all about hubris, it is the idea that they cannot limit themselves to reality, and to what exists, they want to create new realities: this is the enchantment of innovation. Associated with this critical, conceptual attitude, there is a sort of transcendence of materiality that is expressed in ideas such as 'form follows fiction', or "the world doesn't need more chairs, we need stories for the existing ones", where the symbolic

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<sup>5</sup> Critical design is typically identified with the interaction designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. Its aim is to design 'prototypes' whose function is to enable a critical engagement with possible futures entailed by contemporary technological developments (Michael 2012a: 172).

level seems to be preferred. By the beginning of my fieldwork I tried to approach these questions in an explicit way. In particular, I was intrigued about the relationship they establish between objects and ideas. That was how I engaged in an interesting conversation with Osvaldo<sup>6</sup>, the head of the studio. I wanted to understand the status of materiality in relationship to what seemed to me a primacy of ideas over materiality. If, as he suggests, objects are symbols, then what difference do objects make from words? Or if ‘technology is a symbolic system’ (something that he stresses in his thesis)<sup>7</sup>, what difference does it make using technology from using words? Thinking in particular about his claim that “we need stories for the existing objects”, I was curious to know if, in his view, do stories build things, or if things build stories? Or, a different way of putting it, is the meaning prior to things, or are things prior to meanings? Do concepts precede things or do things precede concepts? I wanted to understand, in specific, if the things they create in studio are able to ‘speak’ by themselves or if they have to build a representation first, a story, in order to locate the things in it (this relationship between stories and things is the topic of Chapter 2, entitled ‘Fiction’).

Confirming my expectations to some extent (but also disturbing them in some other ways), Osvaldo explained to me that his vision is that the meaning (ideas, concepts) is a priori. He illustrated this point using the example of a stone, or a shell, that is a generalistic thing, that only becomes a tool for specific functions when it is used for specific purposes:

“On the seashore there is a shell. [...] Then I notice that if I make a hole in the shell and pull a string through it becomes a necklace. Or I can even use it as money. (...) I would imagine that a shell is a shell; it is not a cultural thing. It is there *by nature*. Then, if I give the shell to someone and that person gives me a kiss, or does something, then the shell from a natural thing becomes a cultural thing. [...] Think of the sea. In the past people did not swim at the seaside. Then there came a cultural invention that made it fun and pleasurable to swim at the seaside. This is a true cultural thing. [...] Imagine fruit. For centuries people would not eat fruit. History tells us that in the fourteenth, fifteenth century, the kings started to eat fruit. Until then it was something that was very uncommon. [...]”. (Osvaldo, interview)

His idea, however, is not just that things are put to new uses, it is not *use* that he

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<sup>6</sup>All of the names I will use in this text have been changed.

<sup>7</sup>In his PhD thesis, entitled ‘Kiss the future’, he makes a comparison about the work of Charles Eames and Franco Albini.

stresses, but rather the idea that what moves one object from one state to the other is *project* or the *intent* behind (the agency of the designer). These are some of the assumptions about (the enchantment of) innovation: the idea that it is the aim (the project, the instrumental reason) behind the thing itself that activates it; the idea that plans and intentions precede things. The innovation process is thus assumed as a movement from things to tools (cultural objects), that is, from *natural*, generalized objects to *cultural* meanings: ultimately, from nature to culture – it is in this passage that he locates conceptuality, in the movement from things to ideas. He puts emphasis on the transformative character of innovation: his view is that the transformative element is the ideas, concepts, the ‘cultural’, rather than the existing (nature, objects), or rather than an interaction.

However, Osvaldo does not locate the focus of innovation strictly in ‘invention’ as an individual phenomenon. Thinking about what is the place of individual agency (invention) in the process and what role do objects play in it (materiality), I asked him if he thinks there are radical departures. For instance in technology, aren’t there *new* objects that start a new culture, so to speak? Then, he gave me a series of examples that referred to ‘chains of connections’ between events – for example the transition from a Monblanc to a Bic pen, or to that the paper clip only happened not because of an ‘isolated’ act of invention but because of a convergence of series of events. “Ok, the invention of the clip: if you look at the history of the invention of the clip, you will notice that in a very short period, like let’s say five years, in the whole world there was a boom on patents of clips – in Norway, in the United States, in Japan – everyone was thinking of this, and what was cool is that they are all at the same period. So the story is that... you know what happened? There was the typewriter. Before the typewriter, very few people would write. When you met the typewriter, you met the people producing sheets of paper and didn’t know how to... [simulating by gestures binding sheets of paper]. So there is always this visible or invisible chain of effects”, he said, stressing the continuities – between society and history, industry, other innovations, new objects, and mostly, the world of use – rather than the single inventions<sup>8</sup>. “But then”, he adds, “there are some objects that do start these chains, or the chain starts in a very radical way. [For

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<sup>8</sup> For an archeology of invention, see David Edgerton (2006), who argues that the history of invention we have is itself innovation-centric.

example,] Guttemberg is radical: [with his invention of the print] the system really changes, is strong. Still, people were writing before, but they were writing in a radically different way”. The idea of ‘chains of connections’ that Osvaldo uses, actually summarize the already dominant theoretical approaches to innovation which dissolve innovation as a single act of invention and substitute it for a practical chain of effects and distributed agency. Osvaldo thus illustrates the idea that there is no culture and society on the one side and individual agency on the other – as Latour (1993a) suggests, the separation is itself a modern construction.

### **STS approaches to design innovation and the question of practice**

Technical innovation in science and technology studies in general, in anthropology, sociology and cognate fields is usually approached as a form of practice, where ideas of ‘invention’ and ‘creation’ are demystified. For example, Suchman *et al* (2002) and Akrich *et al* (2002) refer to the performative character of the processes of innovation as an approach that "shifts from a focus on invention, understood as a singular event, to an interest in ongoing practices of assembly, demonstration and performance" (Suchman *et al* 2002: 163). This perspective shows that there is a variety of actors, both human and non-human and thus there is no individual invention, the innovator is a complex collective of humans and non-humans (Akrich *et al*, 2002).

Seen from the actor-network perspective (ANT<sup>9</sup>), innovation is not a linear model, nor a single event; it is rather a longer process of actions and movements, a dynamic assemblage of interests and socio-material arrangements. The idea is that innovation is not made of grand gestures but small operations, in ANT’s language correspond to associations between humans and non-humans: the idea that the materiality involved also influences the innovation processes. Latour gives some of these operations names: *interessement* (*intéressement*) or *enrollment* (convincing other actors), *aligning interest*, *mobilizations* (of allies), *inscriptions* (the way technical artifacts embody programs of use), *translations* (the way 'programs of

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<sup>9</sup> A specific branch within STS that treats objects as part of social networks.

action' or intentions are transformed in the process), *delegations* (the way human intentions are delegated into non-human 'actants'), etc. (Latour 1996). This is the view that there are no objects on the one side, and 'culture' or 'society' on the other, but chains of associations. In this regard, innovation is better seen as an assemblage of heterogeneous entities (human and non-human), with its different interests transformed (technically mediated) in the process into a common goal. This is the acknowledgement that in order to have innovation, it is not enough to have a good idea, or a good invention, since innovation depends on a lot more than invention itself:

"Since the outcome of a project depends on the alliances which it allows for and the interests which it mobilizes, no criteria, no algorithm, can ensure success a priori. Rather than speak of the rationality of decisions, we need to speak of the aggregation of interests which decisions are capable or incapable of producing. Innovation is the art of interesting an increasing number of allies who will make you stronger and stronger" (Akrich *et al*, 2002, Part I: 205).

These studies usually look for the specific 'assemblages' (Latour: 2005) of humans, non-humans, conceptual and material, therefore rejecting grand theorizing of any sort: 'society', 'culture' or 'capitalism'. It is in this vein that Albena Yaneva critiques the tendency of critical theory to regard architecture as a mirror of society, thus considering context as external to the design activity where

"to explain a particular building or urban concept, a critical thinker would show its entrenchment in 'the social context of its time' and would present it as reminiscent of the 'political climate of an époque', of intricate power relations and economic interests. In order to elucidate the design moves and inventive impetus of architects, planners and urban developers, he or she would account for the social and political influences on these 'creators', or reflect on the instrumental role of architecture" (Yaneva 2009: 22).

Yaneva denounces an idea of society as a kind of meta-level of reality, and context as cultural background that prevails in social studies of design and architecture. She thus engages in the opposite direction: design in its most 'trivial, banal, mundane experience' and the 'mundane trajectories of design' to 'unravel the ontology of creativity' (ibid: 25), observing that "[o]ne ought to look at design from the inside rather than observing it from a distance" (ibid.: 26).

For Yaneva, what counts as ‘the empirical’ and ‘ethnographic’ is the ‘unpredictable trajectories’, and thus she chooses to look at the ‘inside’. She argues that in order to understand architecture,

“we need to forget the architect and his building for a moment, and turn away from the official interpretations on the pages of architectural journals and theoretical interpretations inspired by the critical approach. We ought to ignore references to architectural theory, to society or culture as prevailing forces of explanation. We rather need to look at the ordinary forces and conditions of experience, to follow the designers in the office and the paths their work has traced” (ibid.: 28).

Yaneva’s claims are relevant, as well as the differentiation she stresses between her ethnographic work and meta-explanation – her point is that “the experience contingent to the process of making is neglected” (ibid.: 62) – but what about when designers act with this meta-level in mind, producing themselves ‘critical’ work for an explicit critical purpose? What about when there is not design on the one side, and interpretation on the other, or when designers themselves do not believe in a separation between reality and representation and act ‘as if’ they are one and the same thing? What kind of ‘practices’ are these?

What I think is missing from these ‘trajectorial accounts’ of innovation is a different kind of engagement, one that looks at the stories of innovation that resonate with innovators themselves and the prioritizations they themselves make, for instance, between practice and theory, subjects and objects or old and new, in order to rethink what kinds of relationality are important in the innovation process.

Yaneva’s position is influenced by a particular history of ‘practice’, so she describes how in OMA’s office making and thinking happen together: the designer thinks as she works. She demystifies the idea that there is a design idea that precedes the actual shape of things. Instead of anticipation in advance, she shows that designers engage in communication with the materials: “the architects discover what they are doing in the course of doing it” (ibid.: 59). This notion of practice is against rationalism that separates the mental, the mind from body – the idea that plans are one thing, and actions, or practice are quite another; the idea that practice is opposed to planning. Practice, in this conception, is always something that rationality is not,<sup>10</sup> and therefore, when adopting a practice approach, specific prioritizations are made by the researcher in advance. What I am interested in looking at, though, is the

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<sup>10</sup>See also Tim Ingold (2000); Hutchins (1995); Pálsson (1994).

designers' *uses* of practice, understanding their own prioritizations and forms of relationality.

## Practice theory

Although there is not a unified practice approach (Schatzki 2001), the several 'practice approaches' emerged to transcend rigid action-structure oppositions<sup>11</sup> For example, for Bourdieu, practices are deeply internalized and taken-for-granted as inscribed habitus (Swidler 2001: 83). Practice approaches also tend to look at activity as opposed to representation. "Whereas philosophers and social investigators once cited mental entities such as beliefs, desires, emotions and purposes, practice theorists instead highlight embodied capacities such as know-how, skills, tacit understanding, and dispositions" (Schatzki 2001: 7). Practices are never explicitly formulated as a rule. "Most thinkers who theorize practices conceive of them, minimally, as arrays of activity" and most of them "would agree that activity is embodied and that nexus of practices are mediated by artefacts, hybrids, and natural objects" (ibid: 2). Practices, it is argued, displace mind as the central phenomenon in human life (ibid: 11). "Practice approaches (...) tend to reduce the scope and ordering power of reason. They do this by abandoning the traditional conception of reason as an innate mental faculty and reconceptualizing it as a practice phenomenon" (ibid: 5). This prioritization of practices over mind by practice approaches often leaves out how mind (that is, creativity as an internal subjective process), concepts, the priority of plans over doings, or innovation as representation (chapter 2) are themselves practiced, performed, enacted. Mind is an important aspect of design, for example, through conceptuality (chapter 1) or through the model of creativity that is deployed (chapter 4).

Design conceptions of action are embedded in practice. Conceptuality in

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<sup>11</sup> "For their social theoretical brethren Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), and the ethnomethodologists (see Lynch 1993), talk of practices bespeaks such desires as those to free activity from the determining grasp of objectified social structures and systems, to question individual actions and their status as the building blocks of social phenomena, and to transcend rigid action-structure oppositions. For cultural theorist Michael Foucault (e.g., 1976, 1980) and Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 1988) among others, to speak of practices is to depict language as discursive activity in opposition to structuralist, semiotic, and poststructuralist conceptions of it as structure, system, or abstract discourse" (Schatzki 2001: 1).

design, for example, as much as many other aspects that are considered practices (see for example Barnes 2001: 18 about vegetarianism), “is not a matter of behaving in ways that can be exhaustively specified by abstract verbal rules”. In this sense, (design) concepts are also practices; and broadly, ideas about action are also practices: they are forms of action. This ethnography details the multiple forms of prioritizations of “mind”/theory/concepts in design.

One of the critiques that are usually addressed to practice approaches - such as that proposed by Barnes (2001: 21) (in this instance referring to the case of military engagements in particular) - is that “giving attention exclusively to the role of practice is merely to indulge in another form of excess. It amounts to an ungrounded prejudice in favor of know-how at the expense of know-that, in favor of skill and competence at the expense of information and representation”. It is the strict division between mental entities and embodied practices that needs to be questioned. Practice approaches, in a Wittgensteinian tradition, tend to give priority to practice over theory (Bloor 2001). Instead of prioritizing theory over practice or practice over theory, my contention is that one needs to look at the relational dynamics between the two or how those prioritizations happen in the field.

To Knorr Cetina (2001: 184-185), contemporary accounts favor a conception of practice in terms of habits and routines. In contrast, she sees epistemic practice as based upon a form of relationship. She is interested in the dissociation between subjects and objects as something relational, something that is epistemologically deployed, and sees this relationality as epistemologically productive. This is a different effort from that of ANT, which sees subjects and objects dissociation as modern processes of purification. From Knorr Cetina’s perspective, what matters is to look at relationships and uses of differentiations: this form of being-in-relation (Heidegger), according to her, also defines a form of ‘practice’ (ibid: 181). Her proposal is thus “a notion of practice that is more dynamic, creative and constructive than the current definition of practice as rule-based routines or embodied skills suggest” (ibid: 187).

Thus, on the one hand, this thesis is a contribution to practice approaches by emphasizing the importance of looking at concepts as practices; while at the same time, it is also a contribution to STS approaches on innovation by exploring the

relational dynamics of both theory and practice, subjects and objects. As Knox *et al* note (2006: 127), “studies in STS have often tended to retain a distance from the lives of the people they are focused on, in such a way that people become abstractions in the description of scientific processes”. As I will show throughout this ethnography, innovation *practices*, by definition, imply the performativity of the new and the embodied activities associated to it. In my view, there is more to innovation than just technologies gaining reality (Latour 1996): that is why this ethnography details the performativity of how ‘the new’ is brought into being.

## **Two models of action**

What intrigued me in Osvaldo’s narrative is how two accounts of the innovation process – hubristic individual invention and chains of distributed effects – are actually combined. Although acknowledging that there are ‘chains’ of events, in Osvaldo’s discourse things or material objects are still absent, purified from the conception of action: in Osvaldo’s conception, it is rather the intention behind things that moves them, and it is that (human) intention that counts as action; but there is no interaction – actually, one definition of tools is that they cannot ‘act back’ (Ingold 2000: 3007). Therefore, he stresses that “the concept” (project) precedes innovation, thus reinforcing a narrative of innovation as human agency. His point is also that ideas and concepts, despite being part of an explorative process of contingent discoveries, actually precede something – they precede needs: ‘like, imagine the scooter. It’s not that someone says “let’s invent the scooter”. [Rather,] there is someone who says: “listen, World War Two is over. We want to give the masses something very cheap and it shouldn’t be a motorbike [...]”. It has to be different. And then this is *re-re-re* [making a sound suggesting a progressive succession]: “ok, this is it. What should we call this? Scooter” – of course, the naming comes afterwards’, he says, answering my question of whether the concept or idea precedes the object or if it is the other way around. Thus, he emphasizes that no one had an expressed ‘need’ for a scooter; the process was another, less predictable one. However, the agent of conceptuality – the question of who is responsible for the symbolic, the stories, the fictions, or indeed, the project – remains unclear.

Sometimes it is put in the collective ('culture', or 'the spirit of the time' of which he thinks the designer is 'an antenna'), other times in the individual (the designer who is able to read those signs of 'the spirit of the time' and translate it into objects).

This is what Latour (1993) calls a purification process: a process whereby humans and things are separated. But what is relevant in Osvaldo's version of innovation is not so much the suggestion that it is a human enterprise (rather than material, or interaction between human and non-humans as Latour suggests), but rather the specific model of agency, or action, that stands behind it.

One of the classic themes in anthropology since the 1980's is concerned with a contrast between two different ideal models of action: one, purposeful action (usually the formal descriptions of action, such as plans) and two, the actual course of action: the concrete and embodied, situated actions (Suchman 1987). These also correspond to two alternative views of human intelligence and knowledge, where the contrast is usually put as a distinction between cognition and performance (see Pálsson 1994; Hutchins 1995). The same contrast appears through many other forms: for example, Tim Ingold (2007) establishes this contrast through the metaphorical concept of wayfaring: wayfaring as the embodied experience of place-to-place movement rather than pure transport. So when anthropologists describe practices they are usually revealing an 'alternative' way of acting that is 'hidden' beyond the more formal and rational accounts of action (the performative vs the cognitive). Anthropological accounts of 'practices' are thus framed against the privilege that European culture gives to rational, purposeful action, where plans are more important than the actual and always contingent, unpredictable courses of action. Lucy Suchman (1987: viii) begins her analysis of 'situated actions' exactly from these ideal models, questioning the idea that "there actually are different ways of acting, favored differently across cultures" and that "European culture favors abstract, analytic thinking, the ideal being to reason from general principles to particular instances". One way of looking at design is thus through the perspective of this contrast: design is actually an institutionalized form of purposeful action where planning has an important status over the 'contingent' practices that anthropologists usually describe; which is actually Tim Ingold's argument about the relationship between design and skilled practice as something compared with the relationship

between a map and reality (2000: 415). This opposition, however, reifies embodiment (skill as phenomenological embodied practice) over rationality.

But Suchman goes well beyond the simple dualism: using a classic example – the European versus the Trukese ways of navigation, the former representing the planned way, the latter representing the *ad hoc* way – she deconstructs these two extreme positions, arguing that they are both part of action, and that “all activity, even the most analytic, is fundamentally concrete and embodied”. Her point is that “however planned, purposeful actions are inevitably *situated actions*” (1987: viii), that is, “actions taken in the context of particular, concrete circumstances” (ibid.). But importantly she acknowledges that “while there must certainly be an important relationship between ideas about action and ways of acting”, the danger of taking the two models of action is that one confuses theory with practice (ibid.). The crucial distinction being identified concerns “action” and “representations of action”: ways of talking about action, or to use a classic anthropological cliché, the distinction between what people say they do and what people actually do. Another version of this dualistic view of action comes through the form of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its emphasis on ‘becomings’ (rather than beings). But the underlying story is common: both prioritize the embodied and performed ‘real’ action over the rational/mental version of action.

Despite the deconstruction of the dualism that the notion of ‘situated actions’ proposes, Suchman still re-affirms that same dualism with her commitment to “an alternative account of human action” (ibid. x). Although her argument that plans and situated actions are not the same thing is quite convincing – “As ways of talking about action, plans as such neither determine the actual course of situated action nor adequately reconstruct it” (ibid: 3) –, when committing to an *alternative* account of human action, she then ends up reinforcing the distinction she argues against.

This contrast was important to my work but I look at the contrast for the relationships it creates – I look at how it is used, performed. Putting it differently, rather than making prioritizations about action beforehand, what matters is to look at the prioritizations in the field. The designers I describe are people who actually act ‘as if’ there was no such separation between action and representations of action while at the same time performing in ways that reinforce these same separations. It is these troubled relationships between models of action and action/practices that I

want to account in my ethnography of interactive designers in Milan. Suchman's *alternative* account is understandable because she is standing against cognitivist views of computational science. These cognitivist views, in the case that I analyze are not as influential as other sources/models of action, such as, the arts – which obviously are not so instrumental, goal-directed activities as cognitive science is. This fact actually generates specific relationships between action and representations of action. Thus, in contrast to Suchman's work – where one of the views of action (the planned one) is actually being reified in the design of intelligent machines – for the people that I observed, no contrast between the planned and the performed action is possible anymore, but rather what is 'performed' is actually that very same dualism in a quite playful, somehow explicit way. So it is not possible anymore to be on the side of those who interpret the embodied performances against the formal accounts of action. Neither it is possible anymore to commit to 'an alternative account of human action', as it inevitably begs the question: alternative to what? The only thing we can do is, I believe, to describe what relationships people make between those models of action, how do they use them, or to look at the situations where the *interactive* character between representation and represented (Suchman 1987: 189) is activated and what is produced with it. Doing so is describing the practice of 'practice' – an approach where 'practice' is not just an analytical tool for the analysis of social life, but an ethnographically significant form as well (Knox *et al* 2006: 134).

STS-inspired studies of design look at the process of innovation *in the making*, that is, as a form of 'practice' in the perspective that I outline above: it is an approach that privileges one model of action over the other one. This is so because the innovation processes they look at have outputs that are necessarily technical, functional, and useful. In other words it assumes that at the end of the process, innovation is made and accomplished – at the end of an innovation there are new objects to account for – or, if there aren't, as in the case of Aramis (Latour 1996), there is still a process of technologies *gaining reality*. This was also what I expected to find when I went to the field. However, I soon realized that things were more complex: on the one hand, because my observees also acknowledged design and innovation as a form of practice – through tinkering, exploring, learning-by-doing etc., which is an important part of the 'project culture', a part that rather than hidden

or black-boxed is actually exposed and even performed/dramatized as such (an aspect I explore in chapter 3, Learning-by-doing); while on the other hand, a priority of ideas and conceptuality (plans of action) over material objects and functionality is constantly performed (which is the focus of chapters 1 and 2).

This problematic generated two sorts of questions: firstly, a methodological one – the case that I observed is not a typical example of innovation in the making that fits STS approaches. I realized there were no new objects-in-the-making I could look at, nor new buildings, nor new technologies: the designers I refer to are not representative of the conventional, mainstream approach to innovation – a topic that I explore in the next chapter, which is about ‘the Studio’. This introduced a *methodological* difference between my work and STS/ANT inspired work. Because there were no significant objects to follow the ‘unpredictable trajectories of their making in progress’, I ended up learning a lot more about these designers’ worldviews and philosophical stances about innovation by *questioning* rather than just observing what they do ‘materially’<sup>12</sup> – ‘materially’ they do not do much more than sitting in front of computer screens, sometimes with headphones on to intensify their individual relationship with work. This questioning is not quite reduced to interviews or explicit forms of querying, it is another process: questions that emerge spontaneously through the course of observation as part of my engagement with the field. Questions that opened discussions and emerged in situations as diverse as, for example, when interacting in informal conversations with designers, other times they were stimulated by the reading the text of a project or by articles that they wrote, or when following them to design events, or watching student presentations and interactions with lecturers, or simply reacting to references that they send through e-mail. These were situations that often caused me curiosity, estrangement, inquietude – and in that regard it is a very embodied kind of experience that will also turn into a very embodied kind of description. Often these questionings generated improvisation, unintended effects and not only influenced but became part of the design process itself (see for example chapter 2, Fiction).

This is concerned with another aspect in which my ethnography contributes to the STS literature, ANT in particular. One critique that is posed to ANT – despite

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<sup>12</sup> By ‘materially’, I mean following the contingent trajectories, the practical associations between humans and non-humans, according to an ANT terminology and methodology.

the recognition that with Latour's networks, what can be considered as an actor has been broadened considerably – is its “emotional poverty” (Laurier & Philo 1998: 1062). Latour and Woolgar (1979) almost leave out the emotions felt by his laboratory scientists, and, referring to Latour in particular, perhaps this is “a by-product of his materialistic semiotics” (Laurier & Philo 1998: 1062).

“We then find ourselves wondering whether there is something needing to be said about a researcher who studies science and technology throughout his working life, and who evolves his own way of thinking that conjoins with laboratory forms of life and arguably becomes itself hybridised toward scientific modes of emotional denial. Does Latour distance himself from stuff that really does tend to offend the scientific or, here, the engineering sense of self?” (ibid).

It is this “minimal definition of the self”, as Laurier & Philo call it, referring to the calculative beings reduced to the ‘rational action theory’ of Latour’s descriptions, that permits the subsequent radical blurring of humans and nonhumans. However, they argue, it also fails to regard ‘being human’ as a *relational* achievement.

The absence of the body, and therefore emotion and relationality, is also a characteristic of Yaneva’s work, especially in her ethnography of Rem Koolhaas office (2009), where she details the architectural ‘trajectories’ (the ‘makings’) from a very rational, detached, I would say masculine, point of view: she gives an account which is very ‘clean’ of the emotional material that is an integral part of what generates the ethnography. With such an account, in her words, we can “follow the architects”/designers, their “tentative moves”, their “failures and mistakes”, “their meanderings, cautious search for new materials, adjustments of instruments, scenarios for reuse” (ibid: 99-100) – but we cannot follow what were the relationships she established, as researcher, to produce that knowledge. The relationality between researcher and researched is therefore absent, perhaps hidden, or ironically, black-boxed to use an ANT term. Hers is “an attempt to track architectural invention, which is usually considered to be abstract, via the concrete details of architectural practice” (ibid: 101), but in doing so, it is her own ‘mundane stories’ of ethnographic production that remain hidden and the ethnographic process abstract.

My ethnography, in contrast, emphasizes a need to incorporate the body much more centrally into current conceptualizations of the role of materials explored

by Latour and Yaneva into the deployment of ethnography as research method and the process of knowledge production. The ethnographic ‘creation’, alongside design invention, also needs to be demystified and its ‘trajectories’ revealed, as Yaneva already does for architecture. Paying attention to the designers with whom I spent time with and learning about how they produce knowledge, authorship and creativity made me produce a more embodied ethnographic account if compared to traditional STS and ANT ones. So I do make use of my own personal reflections, emotions and anxieties to make ethnography as they were incredibly productive for generating the kinds of questions that emerged throughout the fieldwork dynamics, and therefore (maybe influenced by the designers with whom I spent time with), I tend to expose this process. This dialogic relationship makes it more than just an ethnography *of* design – it is also an ethnography *with* design: there is a mutual shaping, the two disciplines *becoming-with* (Michael 2012a: 174) one another.

Secondly, in the design studio and school where I based my observation it is already taken for granted that ‘making is thinking’ and that learning is by doing (chapter 3) – although not exactly for the same reasons that are described in anthropology. By accounting for how these processes of ‘practice’ are enacted, and how, paradoxically, the mental and concrete is continuously being separated throughout the process, my argument is that instead of departing from a fixed idea of practice we ought to look at what designers *do* with ideas of practice. I want to look at the different kinds of relationships that designers create between theory and practice. I do not see practice as reduced to the ‘trajectorial’, the micro rather than the macro. Rather, I look at the ‘local’ performativities of practice. This means shifting the focus from a concept of practice to the *uses* of the idea of practice; the *uses* of models of action. Actor-network inspired approaches to innovation tend to crystallize an idea of practice, fixing it on the contingent making in opposition to the rational planning. Yaneva says that in Koolhaas’s studio there are no projects, but people making things, thus she establishes a dichotomy between projects – rational, discursive things – and real practices as ‘material ones’. By contrast, in the studio where I worked people are involved in making ‘projects’ (ideas), not things – and this is part of practice too. So what I argue is that the distinction upon which Yaneva bases her theory – and ANT approaches to innovation more generally – does not exist. When Yaneva says that innovation, invention “is not made *outside* the practice of Koolhaas, but *within* the office” (ibid: 100), or when she opposes trajectories to

projects/plans/ideas, she is reproducing the same dichotomy that practice theory aims to criticize. To some extent designers' ideas of practice are borrowed from ethnography and social sciences, but what they do with them is quite specific. For example, I realized they tend to use 'practice' as simply an opposition to 'theory', while privileging a model of action based on representations. Practice theories are themselves a discourse from social sciences that designers *use*. Therefore, instead of assuming what innovation is – that it is a form of practice rather than rational invention-centered activity, that is, the mundane and contingent trajectories instead of big ideas and imagination – I propose to look at the uses: what designers do with specific ideas of generating the new? My proposal is that rather than choosing beforehand between innovation as hubristic or non-hubristic, invention-centered/design-centered or rather use-centered, it is more productive to look at the relationships and effects that these conceptions of innovation – often used in simultaneity – generate.

I should note that innovation is not a 'native' term here. The designers I refer to rarely speak about innovation, however, they often discuss where the new comes from. The practices I detail are concerned with the production of the new. I consider that showing the performativity of the question 'where does the new come from?' is an important aspect of innovation, and indeed, one of the aspects usually missing from the literature on innovation. Innovation, in certain scholarly literature (STS/ANT), is usually referred to as technological innovation, taking the 'newness' of it for granted but disregarding the performative and dramatized aspects associated with the production of the new. According to this literature, innovation is not just about big ideas and genius creators, but it is rather the ongoing mundane practices. Although this is true, my point is that by leaving those 'ideas' and the more conceptual aspects of design aside is also to leave the performativity of innovation aside: the enactments of how the new comes into being and the designers' investment in creativity. It is these aspects that I want to bring into this discourse, therefore contributing to these debates.

## **Design and business**

One of the most important ways in which design contrasts with science and knowledge making is concerned with the fact that designers do not want to limit themselves to reality. I will analyze processes that are not a ‘medium’ to something else, but rather they are ‘the message’ (McLuhan 1964) – both means and ends. Often there are no new buildings here to look at the ‘small operations’ that stand behind them, nor new objects, nor new technologies – technologies are used to activate relationships; objects, images, are used to convey stories, etc.; but there are always ‘new projects’ (that refer endlessly to other ‘projects’) and these new projects constantly enact (the enchantment of) innovation. So the question of innovation as representation becomes incredibly important: the myth of ‘radical transformation’ (albeit the transformation on the level of meaning). Osvaldo partially embodies ANT visions of innovation, for example in what he refers to as the openness of the process, but he also embodies its contradictions, namely, the audacious, hubristic creation (that ANT fights against). It is in this contradiction that the ‘enchantment of innovation’ lies. What this contradiction reveals – embodied through the character of Osvaldo – is that there is no space in ANT for the connection between a particular ‘adventurous’ model of action (based on openness, contingency, unpredictability) and the hubristic one (based on heroic creation).

One of the main reasons why theories like actor-network are limited when applied to design is that design is also a business and not just knowledge-making. Design is concerned with markets, and as Annelise Riles (2010) comments, markets are not analogous to scientific practice. I want to contribute to the study of innovation in ways that are beyond the epistemological practice by precisely accounting for the ‘enchantment of innovation’ that I referred to in the previous section, including the way it concerns with the imagination of possibilities located in a virtual future (what can be) rather than reality (how things are). Riles asserts that markets are more than market makers, and she broadens the frame of the market to include what is on the margins of, and extraneous to the trading room: the legal experts in the ‘back office’, the ‘documentation people’. What is important to my work from Riles’ analysis is the argument that the question of market making is not merely epistemological as, in her case, Social Studies of Finance would assert: “The SSF frame would make sense of all that I have described so far as a ‘standardized

package' of expertise, a 'theory and a standardized set of technologies' that together make it possible 'to locally concretize the abstraction in different practices to construct new problems'" (Fujimura 1992: 169-179, quoted in Riles 2010: 799).

Likewise, one important aspect concerning the limitations of STS approaches to innovation is the absence of temporality. In STS accounts, innovation is in becoming, always emergent, perpetually emergent (see *ibid.*), without necessarily addressing people's relationship with time. One particular aspect that is missing from ANT approaches to innovation is the ways in which innovation processes are concerned with business and economy, and therefore with questions of performativity and temporality, especially with regards to future making (Born 2007) beyond just knowledge making. In this regard, one aspect design has in common with the financial markets is the 'as-if' sociality: the idea that innovation does not occur as a descriptive exercise, but rather a transformative one by building scenarios, stories, enactments of possibilities. Once again contrasting science studies and the specificities of financial markets, Riles stresses the temporal quality of markets: "Seen from the lens of performativity (...), market phenomena are always emergent; the market is an ongoing processual flow of performative utterances and artifacts. But this temporality of emergence leaves to one side the financial market's own hard and explicit constraint of temporal form, what distinguishes it from, say, the temporality of scientific practice" (2010: 801). She proposes the 'temporality' of projects to refer to the temporality of the near future and looks at legal fiction as 'a refreshingly ambivalent epistemological stance' of playing with "as if" (Vaihinger 2001), "a kind of knowledge that is consciously false and for this very reason irrefutable" (*ibid.*: 802). As she states, 'a fiction differs from a hypothesis because the latter is "directed towards reality" and demands verification'. The fiction, in contrast, 'induces only an illusion of understanding. The As If is a kind of subjunctive position, therefore: it is neither true nor not true, Vaihinger insists, but rather is itself the tension between what is true and what is not true" (*ibid.*) The role of fiction, the performativity of 'as if' that underlies the performativity of the new is transversal to this thesis. I contend that it is necessary to bring back the focus to 'innovation' but in different terms: a concern with the performativity and dramatized aspects of temporality (*ibid.*) rather than epistemology. Looking at the performativity of 'as if' is what I will later refer to as 'the ethos of potency', inspired by Sennett (2006).

The question of innovation as ‘as-if’ performativity leads to the post-industrial character of Milan in a transition between a production-driven culture to a consumer-driven one. The designers I analyze perform post-Fordism: there is an imaginary paradoxically impregnated with the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism – the idea of stories and communication is all about late capitalist emphasis on the communicational value of commodities. In design this is quite particular: while Italy’s design revolution of the economic miracle in the 1950’s concerned modern consumerism – this was the ‘heroic’ phase of mass quality design in the 1950’s and 1960’s (Foot 2001) – nowadays the design system is focused on services, such as education. Thus, the idea of creating a new design subject as an intellectual, post-Fordist immaterial laborer alongside the idea that immaterial labor is superior to material one. In contrast with other regions of Italy, design in Milan is more concerned with the world of what Bonomi *et al* (2006) designate the ‘advanced tertiary’, namely universities and research centers that are disconnected from local industries. Milan, in particular, plays an important role in the national market of design education, as it is where the majority of schools and courses are concentrated (*ibid.* 48). For this reason Milan is considered a city of networks, a big metropolitan center where a certain type of “design probably more de-territorialized and connected to the flux of global tertiarization” (*ibid.*) is practiced. The ‘capitalism of networks’ is made of universities, research centers, fairs, financial networks and networks of internationalization, where communicating the process rather than the product is attributed more value than producing commodities. Crucial to this system is not just meaning in terms of the message: it is communication in itself turned into value.

## **Prototyping potential**

It is within this imagined transition (between Fordism and pos-Fordism) that communication skills are performed by designers as one of the most important design products. The outputs of design processes do not refer to any needs other than the need for communication. But designers’ conceptions of communication are intriguing. As I have already recounted, designers don’t design objects or technologies but instead declare that they design relationships, and use technology to

activate those human relationships. Design, they say, is a human-centered activity, not an object-centered one. This conception of communication is part of their re-imagining of the 'new economy'.

The fact that they create communication and thus work with transformation on the level of the sign rather than materiality does not mean that there is no materiality involved. It rather means that often design projects do not have material outputs but remain open. I will describe processes that often involve materiality through the form of prototypes, however, these prototypes are not a means to something else – they do not work, for example, the same way that models do in architecture (Yaneva 2008) or engineering (Harvey 2007). That difference is an aspect that is essential to what they call 'project culture' and conceptuality (Chapter 1). At the end of the processes (that are very material throughout) what remains is not technical, material 'innovation': it is performances of possibilities, enactments of the future.

Within STS approaches of innovation, the prototype is seen as performative because it is an artifact whose significance is not given in advance, but is rather discovered through the unfolding activity of performing as working artifacts (see Suchman *et al* 2002: 172). In these accounts, the prototype is usually seen as a means, a connector, not an end in itself:

"...the prototype offers a perspicuous case of a performative artifact that works to align multiple, discontinuous social worlds. Like any technology, the prototype does not work on its own, but as part of a dynamic assemblage of interests, fantasies and practical actions, out of which new socio-material arrangements arise" (Suchman *et al* 2002: 175).

However, what this thesis is concerned with is the way prototypes, and innovation processes more generally, are themselves both the means and the ends. Actor-network accounts of innovation (Suchman *et al* 2002; Akrich *et al* 2002; Latour 1996; 1999) are oriented to a specific destination: usually a technical or scientific one. Moreover this is where actual innovation takes place – their idea is that people *and* things *make* reality. For example: in his 'novelistic' report on a multisite ethnographic study of a failed technological project (Laurier & Philo 1999: 1050), Latour (1996) tells the story of Aramis, a project to build a personal rapid transit system. Although test prototypes were built, this was an object that never became

real. It remained an object of conversation; it remained a vision, an idea. Nevertheless, it aimed to become real: it is an actor-network that failed to gain reality. The examples I will detail contrast with examples like this one, because they do not aim for ‘reality’ or becoming ‘real’ in first place. They aim to be just that: ideas. These are *conceptual* projects from the start. The separation between ideas and reality does not even make sense here. In these examples, there is not a progressive movement from ‘ideas’ to ‘reality’. This is performative innovation and this notion relies on performative practice. It is in this sense that the context that I describe presents a different view from STS/ANT accounts of innovation: unlike Aramis and most machines that STS theorists usually describe, what I will account are not “the many steps between the beginning of a technological project and its appearance as an apparently complete object” (Laurier & Philo 1998: 1053). What I describe is rather a context where prototypes are means to nothing but themselves, it is technology enacting itself as possibility – the process is inverted in the sense of things doing words again (creating a self-referential world of representation), rather than words doing things or things doing reality (cf. Latour 1993b)<sup>13</sup>.

Following the work of Jiménez & Estalella (2010b), who argue that prototypes work as abductors of sociological effects or as abductors of futurity, I argue that just as the culture of prototyping prototypes potential, the ‘project culture’ does likewise. I am interested in the way prototypes, and innovation processes more generally, work as perpetual means: innovation is not a means to something, but it is celebratory in itself. The modes of design that I analyze are not oriented towards use value but rather to communicative value. This is not to say that these projects don't have a utility: projects sometimes don't seek a utility directly, which is surely concerned with an experimental, explorative attitude. However, that does not mean that in the long term, utility is not implied. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the message is not as important as the means: the means are the process, with its openness and unpredictability. Those characteristics are a rich source for what Jodi Dean calls ‘communicative capitalism’, based on circulating content (2009: 26).

It is in this context that the designers that I analyze claim that they are not just responding to the market but are ‘creating’ new ones. The creation of volatility, constant change, something surprising and unexpected is particularly important to an

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<sup>13</sup> See also Baudrillard (1998) on simulation.

economy where, to recall André Gorz (1999: 5; 28) “money makes money without buying or selling anything other than itself”. Design becomes thus the art of enacting innovation, which is an important part of how designers imagine their relationship with the ‘new’ economic world.

## **Performing immaterial economy**

The post-industrial transformation of economy is approached in many ways and through different concepts: it appears as the 'new economy', as the economy of knowledge (Thrift 2005), the economy of communication (Dean 2009), the economy of virtuality (Massumi 1987) or even the economy of qualities (Callon et al. 2002). What these approaches have in common is the emphasis on immaterial, human resources.

"Whereas managers used to think that the most precious resource was capital, and that the prime task of management was to allocate it in the most productive way, now they have become convinced that their most precious resource is knowledge and that the prime task of management is to ensure that their knowledge is generated as widely and used as efficiently as possible (Wooldridge 1995: 4, quoted in Thrift 2005: 44).

This is not actually new. Edgerton (2006) makes the point that beyond futuristic hype an old, repeating story can be discerned:

“The usual story of production goes like this: there has been a shift in employment and output from agriculture to industry and then to services. The first is labeled the industrial revolution. The second is called a transition to post-industrial, knowledge or information societies, linked to what many called postmodernism, what some Marxists called ‘new times’, and, what capitalist Wall Street gurus called the ‘new economy’. In one version peddled in the 1990s, modern economies are becoming ‘weightless’ and ‘dematerialized’. Such accounts resurrect an old argument, as if it had never been made before, that in future it will not be land or capital which will have power, but knowledge. They promise, again, a world where ‘intellectual property’ and ‘human capital’ rule.” (ibid.: 52-53)

Edgerton suggests that what is happening is actually the opposite: in contrast with the three decades after the Second World War, which were periods of rapid growth and change, lately there has been a stagnation of economy: in the last three decades there has been a decline of economies, as well as growth (Edgerton 2006: 207).

The story that post-industrial economy is a ‘knowledge economy’ is an underlying assumption within the narratives of innovation of the designers I observed, it is as a sort of background, the ubiquitous rhetoric that ‘we are now living in different a world’ and that this world is more ‘immaterial’. This helps to locate their practices, which are themselves not a reflex but a performance of this change: people that act ‘*as if*’ this change is actually real and thus it becomes real. It is within the background of the idea of “a weightless world” that they claim they cannot make new things anymore: according to them “the world doesn’t need new commodities”, rather it needs stories, they declare, to enhance existing commodities. In fact, this is not an isolated view, it is rather inserted into wider trends. A topic that is currently being discussed in architecture is that architecture cannot anymore be about making new buildings (and likewise, that design cannot be anymore about making new objects)<sup>14</sup>. Thus, although the designers within this group are certainly not mainstream designers – where it is possible to find the innovation-in-the-making that STS scholars and Yaneva in particular analyze – they are not an artistic avant-garde movement either because they have a relationship with the market. However, the difference they maintain regarding the mainstream is their conviction that the market is not what it used to be, and one reason for this is the economic crisis. Therefore, they are trying to reinvent new relationships with the market and society. This is certainly concerned with the decline of economies and decline of growth of the last decades that Edgerton discusses (2006: 207). So if they are representative of something it is of these design debates that shift from material culture to more diffuse and difficult to define roles, that are based on the idea that design should be other sorts of (immaterial) things: services, community design, education, innovation consulting, but mostly, the claim that design should be about ‘thinking’, with the emphasis on weightless knowledge as a ‘new’ kind of production – the production of ‘ideas’.

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<sup>14</sup> This will be for example the topic of the 2013 Architecture Triennial show, in Lisbon, curated by the London-based Beatrice Galilee, lecturer at the Central Saint Martins; Also, “Architecture Beyond Building” is the topic of an exhibition from Aaron Betsky, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum in the United States, at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale (an event where the designers of the Studio that I observed frequently participate).

**The thesis** starts with a presentation of the design studio and its philosophy, followed by five ethnographic chapters. The first chapter is about conceptuality as a form of practice: it details how concepts are performed. I describe how specific relationships between ‘abstract’ and ‘specific’ unfold by analyzing examples of school projects, particularly in regard to how these projects establish a relationship with space and the public. The aim of this chapter is to contrast the STS and practice approaches to innovation detailed in the introduction with the performative aspects of innovation. The ethnography in this chapter is about the practice of concepts: it refers to a context where there is no possible dichotomy between concepts and practices. Describing how concepts are enacted and accounting how conceptuality is not an abstract process as I thought it was, I will argue that what I am doing is extending the practice approach to concepts and adding performative aspects to the STS/ANT theories.

Taking this reflection about conceptuality further, Chapter 2 is about fiction in design as a form of dramatization of change. This dramatization of change is based on a description of a project for a design competition where the designers of ‘the Studio’ decided to present a story and enact it visually to present a ‘conceptual’ and ironic proposal about the crisis. The ethnographic piece is about the dramatization of innovation and how my own participation ends up being involved in this dramatizing process, an aspect that calls into question the absence of the body in STS accounts. So on the one hand, my aim is to draw attention to the importance of the performative and embodied aspects of innovation, thus, I move from ‘innovation’ as reality-making to ‘innovation’ as performance/drama/ritual. On the other hand, I will introduce ideas about the role of the ethnographer and reflexivity to show that my own impressions and emotions are not just about my own personal anxieties, but rather they are part of the research process and are a particularly generative one – this is another important aspect of my contribution to the STS literatures on innovation.

The third chapter is about practice – the ethnography is about the deployment of ‘learning-by-doing’ in design education. In the design school, I observed students in a design course and describe their own uses of ‘learning by doing’ – it is where I propose a shift from ‘practice’ to uses of ideas of ‘practice’. I will bring to fore the discussion around practice theories and the work of Tim Ingold in order to reinforce

that my contribution to this literature is showing how theories of practice (such as embodied learning, tacit knowledge and practical skills) are themselves embodied and used in specific ways – an aspect that I will refer to as the dramatization of practice. Thus, I will argue that what I offer is a practice of practice: my aim with this chapter is looking at how ‘practice’, as a concept, is actually used/performed – and even dramatized – within the design context. I will argue that it is not possible anymore to have a privileged (practice approach) point from where to look at the embodied practices in design: what I show is that these notions are already embedded in the field – they are also being performed in particular ways because designers use them in specific ways and for very particular purposes.

Chapter four is about the embodiment of particular notions of mind and creativity. I detail the relationships (between inside/outside or subject/object) that matter in the creative process, stressing therefore my contribution to discussions about creativity as in the work of Gell (1998) and Leach (2004; 2011), by detailing the performances of creativity. Through an example of a workshop where I participated, I describe how creativity develops as an internalized process and how the design objects produced in the workshop are meant to be read as indexes of designers’ agency. The example illustrates the extent to which design is influenced by artistic author-centric conceptions of agency. Again, I also detail my own process of involvement in learning this model of creativity – a process that will later (in the Conclusion of the thesis) contribute to a reflection about the differences between design and ethnography/the different versions of production of the new. In that reflection (Conclusion) I will examine some debates about the collaboration between ethnography and design in order to compare what is considered generative according to each perspective and how they both risk essentializing in opposite ways the question of where the new comes from. I will also mention some other modes of collaborative knowledge production pointed out in the literature: namely, I will refer to the collaborations between design and ethnography as proposed by Suchman (2011), based on her experience as an ethnographer in the development of alternative visions of technology production and use within system development; I will refer to Mike Michael (2012a; 2012b) based on the design work of the artist-designers; another interesting contribution I will mention is “Objectual Practice”, by Knorr-Cetina (2001); and I will also mention Dourish & Bell (2011) with their stress on the

importance of theory and interpretation of ethnography for design engagements rather than just being employed solely as a method in the service of design for collecting and organizing data – their view is that ethnography should not just provide answers, but ask new questions – which is the same argument designers in this ethnography claim for their own profession.

The fifth chapter is about the performativity of ANT's philosophy of action (Latour 2008). The ethnography details how echoes of this philosophy are actually performed in the open-to-contingency model of design entrepreneurship, an open model of person as it is performed by Osvaldo and how this is linked to the idea of 'immaterial'/cognitive economy. I concentrate on how the topic of flexibility emerges in fieldwork for referring to the ambiguity of flexibility deployed as a metaphor regarding labor. If on the one hand, flexibility means freedom, autonomy and mobility; on the other, it is a way of dealing with job uncertainty, the impossibility of 'designing a life'. Flexibility is thus used as an open-ended view of action and subjecthood, that I explore detailing the ethnographic deployment of the notion of 'flexible skills'. Again, this ideal model of person is not about explicit rules, it is about practice: thus, what is at stake is the use of a particular 'concept' of practice.

The idea that is common to these chapters is that although there are no invention acts to account for – no new objects, no new buildings, no new technologies – it is the heroic narrative of a design-centered conception of agency that is reproduced and performed in new, creative ways. Instead of discerning a new philosophy of action, which Latour is so optimistic about, I see an old one, but one that is used to make (new) persons – post-Fordist subjects and 'new' designers – rather than 'new' things.

Summing up, the ethnography aims to extend the practice theory and STS approaches to innovation to include aspects that are absent from these approaches, namely:

- the practice of mind/concepts/ideas (chapters 1 and 2)
- the practice of 'practice'/embodied learning (chapter 3)
- the performative/dramatized aspects of innovation – the idea that innovation is more than technologies gaining reality; the idea that there is no outside, no representations vs. reality (chapters 1, 2 and 3)

- the introduction of the body in the analysis of innovation processes, namely through the embodied researcher and how this is also potentially generative not only in descriptive but also in collaborative terms – that is, not only for ethnography, but also for design (chapter 2, 4 and Conclusion)
- the focus on the performativity of creativity and the production of the new (chapter 4)
- the use/performativity of an open-ended, flexible, conception of personhood as it is deployed by theories of the ‘new economy’/cognitive economy (chapter 5).

## ‘The Studio’

In this chapter I introduce the design office, the key characters and their philosophical understandings of the design process in which they are engaged, showing how this place and these people generated the questions that throughout the thesis I explore in more detail.

My fieldwork, during the year of 2009, was among a group of designers who belong to an Italian design firm from Milan – for anonymity reasons I will simply call it ‘the Studio’. One of the main peculiarities of the designers of this studio is their background in Interaction Design, which was in fact the reason that drove me there. I assumed they were doing Interaction Design and that my thesis was going to be about that, but soon I realized that this was not as I expected. Interaction Design, as I will further explain in the course this chapter, was rather presented to me like a history of a failed future.

Interaction Design is the design branch concerned with the usability of things, and usually refers to digital technologies. It is a new discipline that emerged from the computer revolution. Everything we know of under the label of smart things, objects inscribed with "intelligence" or behavior, such as smart clothes, intelligent houses, and intelligent walls, is referred as Interaction Design. It is mainly associated with functional things: for instance, the mechanical tools and mechanisms that we use in our daily lives and which were designed to be manipulated; it is also found, for example, in exhibitions, where it works as a support for contents, or sometimes refers to the scenography, when it is technologically mediated.

By the beginning of 2000, Interaction Design was considered the *architecture* of the digital age and was supposed to be a revolution in design in the transition from a physical interaction to a virtual one<sup>15</sup>. But I did not find any revolution of that sort in the Interaction Design studio where I did my fieldwork, quite the opposite. On the one side, because there was no cutting-edge high tech and the designers emphasized that they were actually quite low-tech, claiming the use of technology only as a medium and in a very invisible way. I was interested in the invisibility and

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<sup>15</sup> Particularly about this idea see Moggridge in Zanini 2004; Also about Interaction Design, see Crampton Smith 2002; Nordman 2004.

'dematerializing' aspects concerned with Interaction Design processes, but as I further explain, I ended up finding a different kind of dematerialization, concerned with the conceptual, immaterial character of their work.

## **The Institute**

This Interaction Design studio was born from the former Interaction Design Institute, a project of Olivetti with Telecom Italia, which was the first Interaction Design graduate school in Italy<sup>16</sup>. The school/research institute operated from 2002 to 2005, and after its extinction, the design studio – which I will simply call ‘the Studio’ - became its spin-off. As one of the company founders describes,

"We, in (... this studio), all come from Interaction Design Institute [...], born in 2001 as a post-graduate school that received students from all over the world, students with different backgrounds, that is, coming from such a wide range of design in all its different areas (graphic, industrial, product), architecture, psychologists, engineers. The school was divided in two: on the one side, the school itself, dealing with lessons for students, and on the other side, a project section which developed work either for the school and teaching as well as for the world of work, the market. Within this project section a group called Exhibition Unit was born. At the beginning there were only three of us, but a year after we were twenty."<sup>17</sup>

Telecom Italia, the biggest sponsor of Interaction Design Institute, had quit its sponsorship of the school. The school closed its doors and students and teachers spread out through the world embarking in other projects. This design studio was one of the Interaction Design Institute's offspring, founded when a group of people who belonged to the exhibition unit decided to begin another project together.

"In 2005 the Institute closed, alongside as its plans. At that moment, instead of each one of us dispersing on our own way, we've decided to found [this studio]. We therefore continued here the work that we were doing for the Institute, although inevitably widening our scope for market reasons and the studio survival." (ibid.)

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<sup>16</sup> The Institute is known for developing Arduino, an open-source electronic hardware that is often used by artists for interactive installations. It is a single-board microcontroller that was designed to make the process of using electronics more accessible: it is affordable and usable by lay-people (it can be purchased pre-assembled or as do-it-yourself kits).

<sup>17</sup> Lisen, in an interview carried out by a student, courtesy of Lisen. Originally in Italian: my translation.

Oswaldo, Benedetta (the CEO), Silverio (in the office of Turin belonging to the same company), Lisen (a former Master's student) and Gualtierio were the main founders of this new design company – these are some of the characters that I will talk about through this thesis.

Although they say they are a non-hierarchical organization, and at the surface the organization looks very horizontal, Oswaldo is the "brain" and the leader of the company – he is the main designer, with a position similar to a design director of the company – although this is not a formal or explicit role. He had been a lecturer at the former Interaction Design Institute. He was the head of a private design school in Milan, where I ended up doing part of my fieldwork. In Italy, since the 1980's when design became an independent profession from architecture, design is taught in private schools. These schools are predominantly market-oriented institutions that affirm themselves as an alternative to the traditional educational and academic system. 'The Studio' is closely associated with this design school ('the School') in ways that I explore in more detail in Chapter 3 (learning-by-doing). 'The studio' and 'the School' share the same network of people – almost everyone from 'the Studio' also teaches in 'the School', except younger trainees or internship students; and occasionally, other lecturers and students from 'the School' also collaborate in 'the Studio'. This is because 'the Studio' was, indeed, hardly the main source of income for anyone there. The company was not in the best financial situation when I started fieldwork in 2009. With the financial crisis, there were not many contracts and client requests were scarce. However, they stressed they don't work for industry but prefer conceptual, experimental work. They are involved in a kind of design that is less interested in providing answers than generating new questions, as I often heard. The few contracts the company had, however, were concerned with the public sector, for example, in the world of museums – exhibition design; there was also a project on service design for the master plan of Milan's *Comune*. These projects were the main sources of funding. Their strategy was to work with younger collaborators – often unpaid interns and workers, who worked in the company for the purpose of enriching their CV's. At the same time, most of the founders had to have other sources of income, mainly teaching positions, and some of them left Milan in search of better opportunities. Lisen, for example, abandoned the company while I was conducting fieldwork to work in a University in Qatar; Gualtierio had moved one or two years ago for an academic position in Delft. 'The Studio' was an important connection they

maintained – it is a way of producing status and cultural capital for their academic aspirations – but the ‘reality’ was labor flexibility, a high degree of unpredictability that demands a conception of action based more on improvisation than rational planning (an aspect I explore in Chapter 5).

‘The Studio’ was formed when Osvaldo met Benedetta (the CEO of the company) in the Interaction Design Institute, where he was by that time a lecturer, and they have been friends since then. As I later learned, the Institute had been Benedetta's idea. Benedetta is from a "good family", Osvaldo told me, married to a senator. It was her who convinced her husband, “a very powerful person”<sup>18</sup>, who was at the time in the administration of Olivetti, to create that Institute - "the project was like Benedetta’s baby".

In 2003 they started out the "Exhibition Unit", to where most of the now members of ‘the Studio’ belonged. When the Interaction Institute was about to close (and Olivetti became a property of Telecom Italia), Benedetta turned to Osvaldo and asked him why should not harness “that special energy that was created there and start another thing, a company in Milan”. At that time they were connected to a famous private design school in Milan, founded by the legendary Andrea Branzi, radical designer, ex-Archizoom – an avant-garde anti-design movement of the 1960’s. Interaction Design was seen as at the time as the ‘the next new big thing’ in design. And that is how the Interactive Design studio that is the focus of my ethnography was born, as a spin-off from the particular "exhibition unit" group of the Interaction Design Institute.

The organizational structure was composed of a CEO (Benedetta), four project leaders (Lisen, Osvaldo, Alessandro and Silverio), one project manager, administrative staff, there was also a person responsible for the "communication" of the company (press, website, etc). There were several internship designers who only stay for short periods - Flora, Luna, Silvana, Smedt just to mention some who I will refer to, and several freelance collaborators (designers, architects, engineers) who participate occasionally in some projects. This means that there are many people circulating there without having the office as their regular workplace. Very few people have an official attachment (contract) to the company. Most of them have connections to several other work places as freelancers.

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<sup>18</sup> This senator happens to be also the director of the newspaper *La Repubblica*, and *Canale 5*, a TV channel.

This situation made my ethnography difficult, but it also made it interesting in many ways. I was expecting to find a workplace with a more or less bounded and circumscribed group of people sharing the same physical space in regular periods of time, but what I found was a looser structure, it was a network – which in itself is not surprising, since bounded groups exist only in our heads (as representations). However, the working dynamics that I found surpassed my expectations because it is much more spread and sparse, as much in time as in space, than I could ever have imagined. At the beginning I found it very strange that there were periods in which the office was empty; people were always somewhere else and I had the impression that not much was happening – it was clear that whatever that was happening was invisible to me. This may have been for several reasons – one of the most obvious is the use of internet for most of the daily contacts, whether formal or informal – e-mail, chats, they use Skype quite often – and this way the work is very much invisible and in that sense, ‘immaterial’. The consequences are that everyday work interactions become mostly private (although not all, due to the fact that there is a mailing list which they use for “public” conversation, and not only directly for work – it somehow substitutes the informal conversations that might happen, for example, next to the coffee machine). In this regard, the Internet obviously works as a faster way for communication, though it surely has other kinds of effects as compared to physical communication. Perhaps this does not sound that surprising if we bear in mind that working relations have everywhere become digital to some extent. With the Internet, work is not bounded to the physical space of the office anymore (an aspect that I expand in Chapter 5). This aspect is perhaps more intensely felt in design offices – in this one in particular, it is common to exchange messages and e-mails between people sitting side by side at the same table. Therefore the Internet became a medium that I ended up relying to a great extent for ethnographic communication<sup>19</sup>.

One of the main reasons for such an absence of ‘real’ social interaction – and intensive use of internet communication – is the fact that design companies currently have a very flexible system in terms of working contracts, which make people move around, working in a number of several other projects and activities in other

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<sup>19</sup> Recent reflection about the relationship between globalization and ethnography on the internet (Farnsworth & Austrin 2010: 1124) point out the ways the notion of space has become problematic because the world-society is becoming ‘a network of practices’ in which ‘social space is of primary importance, and physical space is only subsidiary’ to the process of fixing and managing identities (Hepp 2004, in *ibid.*).

companies at the same time – a topic that I explore in more detail in Chapter 5, when looking at flexibility in design work and careers. Designers in Italy are mostly independent professionals, they work without contracts, are freelancers. They are “new independent entrepreneurs” (Bonomi *et al.* 2006: 9). This is a context where “[p]rofessional careers are not made staying within the same company all-lifelong, but circulating between different companies, following the development of each one’s own competences and the requirements/possibilities of the company where one works”, where “the workplaces look like more and more a train station rather than a village” (ibid. 2006: 67). This is also true in the case of ‘the Studio’ that I describe, where a great part of workers do not have an exclusive link with the company, most of them are freelancers or work there part-time, while others are interns trying to enrich their curricula in the beginning of their careers. Others are hired with short-term contracts, and thus they do not stay long. The founders are the most stable collaborators, though not always present. The result is that there are always new people in and out of the space, which makes social interaction much harder to develop for the researcher. The structure of this network and its working dynamics and relationships is quite loose and difficult to follow. To further complicate things, there is also the connection of designers from ‘the Studio’ with ‘the School’, where most of them divide their daily activities.

So I realized that people work in projects, rather than in the company – each project works as an isolated unit and it has its own collaborators: some of them are common to other projects, but not as a rule. When the project ends, the network is usually dissolved. This is not by chance; it is rather part of a new organizational trend within the so-called ‘new economy or the ‘knowledge economy’, where new organizational technologies have been put in practice to produce more productive bodies (Thrift 2005). One of these techniques, which according to Thrift are part of a new management ethos, is working in teams and projects through which optimal alignment of bodies is now considered to occur. Working in teams and projects seems to offer some advantages: "The intention is to produce concerted periods of time in which people can come together productively to push through a particular creative project. This will involve designing rapid team start-ups (through the use of facilitators, 'check-ins', and other means of producing intense dialogic conversation) which will build both trust and new ideas, and careful time management" (ibid.). In the 1990s the use of teams and projects in the USA became so widespread that

companies had over half of their employees working in teams, and even “[...] the US Department of Labor has suggested that schools begin training students in such competencies as team work and project management. Scientists, engineers, technicians and so forth increasingly see themselves as engaged in the project, not the company” (Flores and Gray 2000: 24-5, cited in Thrift 2005: 119). But all over the world "teams and projects are now regarded as the main way in which bodies can be aligned to produce creativity", and "offices are being redesigned to cope with this way of working. ‘Hives’ and ‘cells’ are being replaced by ‘club’ and ‘den’ environments (Duffy 1997, in Thrift 2005:119). The office space of ‘the Studio’ is indeed an open space with long desks, able to cope with this new form of loose, flexible work organization – practices that obviously were facilitated by the use of the Internet.

Precisely because people in ‘the Studio’ don't work in the company, but they work in projects, there are no regular meetings there (except for very special reasons). Whereas in the "previous organizational world" (by the time of organized capitalism) meetings had the function of sharing decisions or discussing information and promoting workers participation in the company, here they are considered a waste of time – Osvaldo believed that working in teams for each project is much more effective. The working flexibility (and flexible work arrangements), by its turn, connects with the ubiquity of crisis discourse (and its actual effects). As I already mentioned, financial difficulties were being felt; mainly due to the reduced number of requests from clients – one of the few ‘general meetings’ that was organized was actually to inform the collaborators about the situation of the company. There were volunteers doing unpaid work. The fact that ‘the Studio’ does not produce "conventional" design work – that is, products, industrial design with a more commercial vocation or design that fits into traditional design categories – complicates that situation even further. However, the somehow experimental/conceptual character of their work is paradoxically attractive for young trainees looking for exciting and more experimental kinds of professional experience. ‘The Studio’ has the reputation of doing a ‘more conceptual’ kind of work, and thus despite the crisis, it was still a busy place, with different people passing through.

## The difficult categorization

‘The Studio’s’ design is difficult to categorize in typical design areas (product, service, graphic, or indeed, interaction design), because they do a little bit of everything. They do not work with commercial products for industry, but their work cannot be considered conceptual design either. Just as the Interaction Design Institute died, Interaction Design was also spreading, dissolving into other areas.

“Interaction Design was firstly called Interactive Multimedia (used sound, imagery, the little details of usability) about 8-10 years ago, but it is nowadays dead. ‘The Institute’ and LCA were the first institutes in this area. [...] And it involved graphic designers, engineers, etc., but later it spread into industrial design, multimedia, several areas...” (notes on my first interview with Lisen, fieldwork diary).

They work mostly with services, exhibition design and other works that sometimes use several specializations at once. Because of their connection with the design school, they are also engaged in educational activities – they run a lot of workshops, they teach, some of them write articles or are invited to lectures – but are not ‘traditional’ academics. Or, to put it differently, they are not specialized in anything in particular. They say they do ‘communication’. Knowledge is their product, and obviously, this has a lot to do with communication. There is a constant work of transforming processes into communication of those processes – this is the *dematerializing* process that I became interested in during the course of the fieldwork process, in the sense that what matters is the process as such, as an open-ended kind of enterprise. For example, most of the time in studio is spent preparing the visual representation of projects<sup>20</sup> (the project booklets), that is, the graphic documents on ideas to present to some client, whether it is a real or potential client. The booklets take the form of a brochure, and are “summaries of the design steps that make the material trajectory of a project traceable”, often cultivating the office approach (Yaneva 2009: 72-73). Then, it follows a process of convincement, and *occasionally*

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<sup>20</sup> Referring to concept books in OMA, Alben Yaneva (2009: 72-73) describes them as organizational devices, that together with other visuals and material arrangements such as models, offer a glimpse of design in the making: “Their role is performative: not passive illustrations of projects or urban concepts, or instantaneous responses to a competition or a client’s brief, but *organizational devices* used to enact further design moves, to train the younger architects and to inform the invited viewers, to teach them how to think architecturally, to encourage them to act accordingly” (ibid: 73; original italics).

we see the implementation of something. I say *occasionally* because a great part of the projects, specially these days with the economic crisis, never leave the conceptual stage – with the economic crisis they don't work so often on demand, they are rather usually “fishing for projects” (*pescare progetti*). Most of these projects, however, are meant to be conceptual from the start, and so the conceptual is not a means to something, it is the end itself. They often develop prototypes and other experimental activities, thus they work on the experimental level of ideas, of new possibilities, but often remaining on the level of potential, producing ideas rather than material things. Mostly, as I will describe in chapter 2, they work on the dramatization of innovation; that is producing illusions (dramatizations) of change rather than practical change. It is in that sense a world where imagination is always better than reality in almost a Baudrillardian (1998) sense.

Another reason why their work is difficult to categorize into traditional design areas is because of their multidisciplinary approach to design. The team is mixed, with people coming from very different backgrounds working together: architecture, engineering, graphic design, service design, interior design, sociology, psychology. That means they are not so specialized in Interaction Design as I thought they were in terms of outcomes, but the fact that they have a multidisciplinary approach to design is probably one of the strongest signs of the influence of Interaction Design methods and of their experience in the Interaction Design Institute in particular. Interaction Design often results from the collaboration between engineers and computer scientists with people who come from a more artistic background – graphic designers, artists or architects. For example, in the case of ‘the Studio’, among the various people from different areas who collaborate with ‘the Studio’, there is the articulation between Osvaldo and Gualtieri. I mention them not only because their association corresponds to the archetype of Interaction Design multidisciplinary, but also because they are archetypes of ‘immaterial workers’ within the so-called creative economy, and thus they embody some of the contradictions that the work in this ‘new economy’ (the media, creative businesses) is usually associated with – again, an aspect that I explore in more detail in chapter 5. The figure of the ‘autonomous worker’ (Lazzarato 1996), of which the artist and the IT contractor are the archetype (de Peuter 2011: 420), despite his/her “animating desire for autonomy, especially for greater control over one’s time and the type of work one takes on” and the fact that flexible work may often be “a decision taken in

an act of self-determination and as a conscious rejection of standard work routine”, “the autonomous worker can always turn into a precarious worker” (Terranova 2006: 33, quoted in de Peuter 2011: 420).

Oswaldo is an architect, with a PhD from the *Politecnico*<sup>21</sup> di Torino. Although he is a lecturer, he would present himself more easily as a design intellectual than an academic - he hates typical academics. He is provocative, often controversial and never misses an opportunity to set up a discussion. Although he started his career in building architecture and then moved to new technologies and to a more immaterial kind of design, mainly through his contact with the Interactive Design Institute, he often stresses that he is not a missionary of Interaction Design, he is not even a missionary of new technologies: "*sono un progettista*" (I'm a designer). Oswaldo is surely a strange character with a strong dominant effect on people: despite his swaggering ego, generally people admire him, maybe because he cultivates an aura of rebellion.

Oswaldo is someone totally dedicated to his work. He has a very intense work life (I would say he is a workaholic) but that does not mean he doesn't have social life, quite the opposite: his social life is not separated from his work life. His friends are people who work directly or indirectly with him, they are people in his network. In fact, he stressed that “in design there is no separation between work and personal life anymore”, and that his work is his personal life, explaining also that design is a totally social activity, that social skills are the most important skills a designer should have nowadays because design work depends on social networks. His work depends on his network of friends.

Details about his awkward behavior – he appears untidy, obsessed with work – were often motive of gossip among younger designers. He usually spends his weekends in the office, often writing – he often writes articles for *Abitare*, the famous Italian design and architecture journal based in Milan. In some ways, Oswaldo cultivates some of the traits of the ‘new media’ entrepreneur, whose ‘ideal character’ is largely described by authors such as Sennett (2006), Bauman (2000) or Thrift (2005). Common to the descriptions of these ‘techies’ elites is the substitution of the Protestant work ethic and its principle of delayed gratification for the short-term mentality; high mobility compared to a new form of nomadism; high social

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<sup>21</sup> In Italy, *Politecnico* is a University of Engineering and Architecture.

capital and networks; flexible power; high proneness to change and moreover, no separation between work and life. This new capitalist elite is described to be as volatile as 'new' capitalism itself, but also as disoriented (Bauman 2000: 153). Osvaldo's image retains some of the characteristics of the classic entrepreneur caricaturized by Thrift:

"The media has mythologized stories of entrepreneurs sleeping in dingy motel rooms, or in the office floor, slaving away at the computer until the early hours, sometimes forgetting to eat or to take a shower. They wear rumpled clothes, drink beer and play in their few free hours. Eventually they become billionaires. Just how much of this is reality and how much is myth is irrelevant. The point is that it has become the industry's image, and it is not a role many women see themselves playing. As they cannot place themselves in such a culture, many may choose to shun the industry (Griffith 2000, p.12, in Thrift 2005: 121).

Interesting, in this regard, is also Sennett's description of Bill Gates as the embodiment of this heroic figure (1998: 62-63).

The fact that Osvaldo's work is his personal life is quite a gendered thing (and exclusivist, since this is the reason why women are not so well represented), reminding us of the descriptions of the predominant male entrepreneurs who work long hours, both in the old and "new economy" (Thrift 2005: 121). It is in this aspect that Thrift argues that the new economy mirrors the old (cf. 121), because the ultra-capitalist 'romance' (the passion for business) of the new economy (with its general increase in managerial working hours, more time spent traveling, etc.) also produces this pervasive exclusivity, where women find it hard to participate.

But one contrasting difference between the stereotype of the classic entrepreneur and the 'new economy' one is that in these businesses there is not much money at stake. These are not big business but mostly 'cultural' businesses, intense exchange of ideas, references and of course some of these exchanges result in money exchange but it is clearly not the most profitable business, especially in a time of crisis. As Jacques Attali (quoted in Bauman 2000: 153) describes them:

"They do not own factories, lands, nor occupy administrative positions. Their wealth comes from a portable asset: their knowledge of the laws of the labyrinth. They 'love to create, play and be on the move'. They live in a society 'of volatile values, carefree about the future, egoistic and hedonistic'. They 'take the novelty as good tidings, precariousness as value, instability as imperative, hybridity as richness'".

Gualtiero is one of his friends, one of the shareholders who, together with Osvaldo is also among the founders of the company. Nowadays Gualtiero only collaborates with the studio occasionally, and mainly in the conceptual stage of the projects, because he had moved to the Technology University of Delft in the Netherlands about two years before I began my fieldwork there. Gualtiero also belonged to the mythical Interaction Design Institute generation, where he had been a lecturer, together with Osvaldo. Despite being in Delft, Gualtiero is an intellectual presence in ‘the Studio’, where he still exerts a great influence, mainly in the level of strategy and decisions. Gualtiero and Osvaldo often work together on articles for design publications. Nevertheless, they belong to quite different intellectual worlds: they represent two radically different design ‘cultures’.

## **Two design ‘cultures’**

According to Tim Marshall (2009) “design pedagogy has operated in the past in the shadow of art or engineering education”. Thus, “[n]umerous schools all over the world follow an ‘art and design’ pedagogy, whereas others are positioned within the engineering spectrum” (Yagou 2007). This division, as Marshall points out, is a product of modernity: it goes back to the industrial revolution which “framed learning through the material-based logic of guilds (such as printing, wood, metal, textiles); and later, the modernist period professionalized the crafts (graphic, product, interior, and fashion design for example)” (idem).

In Italy, design has historically been framed within the ‘art pedagogy’, rather than ‘engineering’. Design in Italy was born from architecture rather than technology. The first designers were architects: most of the designers still have training in architecture, as is the case of Osvaldo, Alessandro, Antonia and many others in ‘the studio’. Later, when design started to gain autonomy from architecture, it became integrated in Art Academies. This fact gives rise to different design ‘cultures’. The allocation of design within Art Academies is more common in Italy (and in Southern Europe more generally) where there is not such a strong association with design and technology industries as there is in northern countries. Consequently, the differentiation between experts and lay people from the

architecture/Art Academies context is different from the differentiation in the technical universities case: they represent two different design ‘modernities’ which currently conflict and overlap in curious ways. In this regard, for example the Scandinavian approach has a completely different ‘design culture’ compared to the Italian one: it stresses the importance of the user participating on *equal terms* as the developers (Greenbaum & King 1991, cited in Gulliksen *et al* 2000). The engineering design pedagogies attend to users, while the art-academies ones do not – they rather cultivate a ‘design-as-masterpiece’ model, where it is users/audience/consumers who have to adapt to innovation.

In the field of Interaction Design, there is a prevailing approach, mainly coming from the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon world, which is user-centered design – one of the main references is The Design Academy of Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, which is representative of the ‘engineering pedagogy’; Gualtiero’s school is closer to that one. The user centered design (UCD) is an approach which locates the user and its needs at the core of the project, often making use of social sciences methods – including ethnography – for inquiring and studying users. These approaches are, in practice, quite heterogeneous and assume different other branches (Wilkie 2010) – while the intentions begun to be truly ethnographic and collaborative, really involving people in the processes of designing a product (Suchman 1994), the term user-centered has lately been used as a form of market research, referring to the use of written enquiries or focus groups to investigate a target group and assuming a general and abstract notion of user. User-centered-design has become a tool for companies, and is used mainly in the development stage of industrial consuming products, usually for improving technological devices. Regardless of the variety of methods under the umbrella of "user-centered", these approaches are found in a design tradition coming from scientific, technological engineering faculties.

So while Gualtiero’s background is much more ‘scientific’ or ‘academic’, Osvaldo’s is more ‘artistic’ and ‘intuitive’. I found the combination of the two very interesting because there is obviously a big overlap; they are not so easily catalogued. Osvaldo is also the director of the design school, which is an Art Academy, and ‘the Studio’ is in fact an extension of that environment – in design and architecture this is called a ‘studio-based’ tradition, in opposition to the ‘academic based’ one. The more artistic, studio-based approach is more centered on the

creativity and the individual self of the designer than anything else, and it is much more connected to the artistic world and an artistic tradition rather than a scientific/academic and technological one. Thus, the reason why I find this relationship between Osvaldo and Gualtierio significant is because it suggests a convergence between different areas that have transformed design, maybe forever. This interdisciplinarity, this curious mix between the different areas is an interesting point for researching the process of dematerialization in design. On the one hand, we have the cognitive rationality of information sciences, with its (traditional) emphasis on instrumental rationality. On the other hand, we have a design tradition of a more artistic vocation, which is now being influenced by a discourse of conceptual art with the result that design is breaking away from the materiality usually associated with it. The outcome is that ‘being conceptual’ or doing ‘conceptual work’ is the maximum intellectual ideal a designer can reach in his career. Either coming from information technology or from conceptual arts, conceptuality, abstract ideas, imagination and stories are more valued and have priority over the existing reality, sensorial experience or materiality. In chapters 1 and 2 I describe situations where these relationships between abstract and specific are brought in.

So these are two persons connected to different (but articulated) views and ways of imagining innovation, and this is particularly so in regards to “user-centered design”. Even though Osvaldo is someone who shows himself open to participative design and community design, especially through participative architecture – and a great part of the projects found in ‘the Studio’ have this aspect in their conception – he refuses himself to make user-centered design, which he thinks is useless. His reasons for this were discussed during my fieldwork on several occasions, including right on my first day: while presenting them a paper sheet with the aims of my project that I distributed to everyone, I naively mentioned that topic, taking for granted the association between interaction design and user-centered methods. Osvaldo promptly said that I was wrong: that was not their approach and if I wanted to study that, I should go somewhere else. So, I immediately had to renegotiate my role there, showing that I was open and would adapt to what I would find. Nevertheless, I was for a long time regarded as someone who defended user-centered methods; because that’s what in their minds ethnographers, regarded as users’ advocates, do in a design context.

One of the arguments Osvaldo uses for refuting user-centered design is that, in his view, it is truly an obstacle to ‘progress’ – he often says that if we only gave people what they want, we would still live in caves. Only later I realized this is in fact one of the greatest clichés of innovation, the one that widely circulates within people who work in the so-called creative business. Actually, the myth goes that it was Henry Ford who said something similar: “If I had asked users what they wanted, they would have said ‘faster horses’”. Apparently this statement suggests a way of reinforcing the traditional agency of the creator towards a very specific model of innovation – the designer as a creator, a full agent, and the idea of users/lay people/consumers as passive recipients (in Gell’s terms, 1998), which ends up being a reproduction of modern conceptions of agency. In this conception, only designers as creators would be able to introduce change, whereas users/lay people represent an obstacle to change. But the field presents some contradictions, though: if on the one hand, the identity of the designer is being renegotiated, and in that process it is being turned away from the idea of a single author, where the designer instead is defined as a coordinator (a manager of networks), perhaps more akin to a film director or a post-bureaucratic form of management (design as a collective rather than individual process, and indeed, innovation as a collective process); on the other hand, creativity is practiced as an interiorized process – a paradox that I explore in Chapter 4. A statement I read in a document they had produced a couple of years ago (which was intended for the creation of a new design school in the south of Italy) might make it clearer:

“The designer is not the person who provides solutions. The role of the designer (at least of the greatest ones) is that of helping to formulate new questions. Questions which no one ever thought about before, questions which put in question the established models, which allow us to think in a different way. Thirty years ago, no one would ever thought about the “need” for listening to music while one walks on the street. Then, at a certain point, some Japanese engineers gave us the Walkman. This isn’t born from a desire or an expressed need. No. It is born because someone starts thinking about new possible questions” (material of ‘the Studio’ produced for a project in *Sardegna* – guida 01, p. 13, my translation)

Despite being considered a collective agency, it is still this model of agency (and therefore, creativity) – design-centered – that is considered as expertise in innovation and progress, the one who breaks with the past and tradition. Thus, the borderline between expertise and lay people is here not just reproduced but re-

performed in new ways, suggesting that a modernist conception of artistic individual agency is still in operation. For example, another argument that Osvaldo often uses against user-centered design is that: “if I go to the dentist, why would the dentist ask me which treatment would I need?” Design-centered innovation is therefore discursively linked with an idea of progress in a top-down style process. To Osvaldo, the question could not be more clear – user centered approaches are used whenever one has the need to justify the design process to a client – it is a methodology which allows making the process visible. In the world of companies it works as an instrument. There are nowadays a whole new series of companies that make their creative process visible (for example, IDEO<sup>22</sup>, in Palo Alto, California, one of the best known ‘Design and Innovation’ consulting firms), and therefore, according to him, user-centered design has a specific place in the market economy, not because users are observed, but mainly because of instrumental, rhetorical reasons. He argues that the interest in users is not the reason why the companies use these methods; rather they use it for their own interests and purposes. But in what regards to the world of the "project" (the world of design), he considers user-centered methods useless. In sum, it is not an imperative instrument to the design process, but mainly to the world of these companies, where it works as an instrument of communication – mainly as a device to convince investors that the product was tested and therefore reassure them it is going to be successful. User-centered design, he argues, “is an instrument as important as the suit one needs to wear in meetings in order to convince those same persons”.

So his argument is that in regards to *having ideas*, whenever one has to propose something new, a user-centered approach is not useful. His view is that the passage between analysis and synthesis is not linear, that is, it’s not the method that guarantees a good result, but rather there’s always something unpredictable in-between. Thus, he declares himself an advocate of traditional design (that is, design-centered) because he is not very concerned with "communicating the process" as UCD believers do – so he just feels the need “to present the result, in the old-fashion design way”. In contrast with the more scientific approaches to design, chance and unpredictability are seen as important ingredients in the design process. This suggests innovation as a contingent process – the idea that the outcomes are always

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ideo.com/>

unpredictable, and perhaps not even totally dependent on the designers' agency. But although Osvaldo's version of design incorporates chance and contingency, potentiality or virtuality and a more collective notion of creativity and agency, at the same time it is full of contradictions, because the modern model of agency is still there. While it is an approach that puts creativity at the center of its model of innovation and progress, it also suggests a model that emphasizes reason through conceptuality and locates it in the individual creative minds. It is this tension and contradictions between the individual and collective agency in the creative processes that I will detail ethnographically throughout the thesis, more explicitly in Chapter 4 (Creativity).

## **From Interaction Design to Fiction**

One of the questions that intrigued me most at the beginning of my fieldwork was the issue of why 'the Studio' was called an "Interaction Design" studio if the work they produce there is not specifically Interactive Design? Why do they use this label?

Lisen was one of the project leaders of 'the Studio', together with Osvaldo and Alessandro (in the office in Milan; there is also Silverio in the office in Turin). Lisen is a Danish graphic designer and also comes from the "golden generation" of the Interaction Design Institute, where she did a Masters in Interaction Design and belonged to the Exhibition Unit. She is one of the founders and shareholders of 'the Studio', and was also a teacher in the 'design school' at the beginning of my fieldwork. Lisen was the person with whom I established contact first and also the first one who introduced me to their idea of design being fiction. At the beginning, she took some responsibility in integrating me and supervising my presence there. She later moved to Qatar, where she earned a position to teach in an American university, though continuing her connection with 'the Studio'.

I had several conversations with Lisen about the specificity of 'the Studio', where obviously their relationship to Interaction Design was discussed. In one of those conversations I asked her if Interaction Design was an aspect that defines the

character of 'the Studio'. Interaction Design, "that's what we did in ['The Institute']". That is in fact our background and experience, but we have to take any kind of work that we get [...]" However, in her view it is difficult to define the character of 'the Studio', because, as she said, "we are undefined – we do communication – visual communication, video communication, etc." This notion of 'communication', however, is specific to the universe of Interaction Design: "There are three types of communication", she details: "human/technology (in an exhibition, for example); human/human; or technology/technology. In 'the Studio' we work mainly with the first type of communication".

The idea of communication is also linked to the fictional. "We are very playful. We believe that design is fiction. We work very much with the idea of telling a story: we call it fiction. When there is no fiction, there is hardly any desire. In industrial design there is no fictional – only functional", she claims. But what do they exactly do with this idea of fiction? How are stories embedded in design?

"We always say that 'design is fiction', that is, design projects should create a story, and this doesn't refer only to Interaction Design but for every design approach (sic). To create a story means either creating an explanation route more easily understandable for the client, or whether to create a film that helps [him] to familiarize with our product or service, or one can create a product that is an experience, a narrative. We always think from the beginning in the possible scenarios concerned with the creation of desires. *We think about stories that generate desires*. Whereas for product design it is about creating forms, it is to work with the physical. Often Interaction Design doesn't create anything physical and that's why we use the story instrument."<sup>23</sup>

Interaction Design is thus an instrument for fiction, for communication. "The Studio' is really a way of communicating", she says, referring to the idea of using technologies not for technology sake, but for activating relationships between people, for instances, "in exhibitions, we use the elements of Interaction Design – the things that make it more magical". By way of an example she mentions a project in the Institute, where they were invited to participate in this exhibition called "Touch me", in the Victoria and Albert Museum. "We proposed *Tune me*, a futuristic radio – as if you enter into a radio. In this exhibition we used technology to make a creative, sensorial experience, and Interaction Design is the tool which allows you to do it this

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<sup>23</sup> Lisen, in an interview carried out by a student, courtesy of Lisen. Originally in Italian - my translation; my Italics.

way". Their use of interactive technologies in exhibitions is described as a *medium* for communication and thus it is meant to be invisible, or as they say, "as natural as possible".

What Interaction Design changed in the world of design, according to Lisen, is that "usually the engineer worked with the technical, while the architect or the designer worked with the aesthetical and the meaningful: Interaction Design came to dissolve this, it is not possible to have this clear-cut division anymore because one person is not able to make a design by himself – it is still possible maybe in big companies, like in Apple and the i-pod, but not for smaller companies" (Lisen, notes on interview). Her point is that there are, and perhaps there will always be, people working in traditional design areas – product/industrial design, graphic design, interior design, architecture, etc., but Interaction Design brought to design an interdisciplinary way of working. Thus, what changed was the notion of design: as Osvaldo often declares, "the architect is not just the one who draws houses anymore, it is the one who is able to put a plan in operation" (which I develop in Chapter 5). This is a broader notion of a project – the project is not a technical, specialized drawing or plan for some specific solution, rather those technical solutions are secondary to the idea of project: the project is the broader vision – sometimes they refer to it as "the superiority of the project".

In an interview done by a student, Lisen was asked about the reasons for the name of 'the Studio' – specifically, why the name of their studio has the word 'lab' in it. Lisen's answer is quite insightful:

"In reality, the word Lab doesn't have much meaning, more than anything else it refers to the fact that we were born in an academic, scholastic environment. As it happened in [The Institute] we kept the multidisciplinary as a characterizing element but also by necessity. We work in fact with psychologists, robotics engineers and designers from so many areas that it is a laboratory in this sense because it brings together so many people with different interests and because it was formed from a group of academic work. The fact that it is a heterogeneous group is in fact a personal choice of ours, but it's also motivated by the nature of Interaction Design, that producing very complex products needs the collaboration of so many sectors, as a way of putting together so many competences." (Interview, courtesy of Lisen. Originally in Italian: my translation).

The stress on interdisciplinarity and new ways of working that are more collaborative (work in teams and in projects) is also something often signed as a characteristic of the change in work ethics of the 'new economy', especially in the media area, where

interdisciplinarity is regarded with great importance because of the possibilities that team work and group interaction may open up for innovation and creativity. Not only is space designed and reorganized to stimulate 'transactional knowledge', but also new models of management try to harness tacit knowledge and unpredictable interactions (Thrift 2008: 44-45). It is in this sense that 'the Studio' is a context where knowledge is increasingly described as *interactive*, and thus considered a completely different way of doing design – a discourse of rupture with previous ways of working. According to Lisen, "we are not living in the industrial era anymore", so if Interaction Design is not the right word for another way of doing design, "maybe what we need is a new dictionary", she suggests (notes on interview – fieldwork diary). This is also a point of identity contrasted with what other designers do:

Lisen: "But not all designers think that way. The best example I can give you is my own brother. He is a designer, but we started to take...let's say different roads of design when we were studying. He studied industrial design, so he is a perfect skilled drawer, he knows... he can draw everything correctly, and use all the tools in order to make a drawing of a chair, etc. And the work that he is doing, is... for example, he's doing mobile phones where he is drawing the technical... everything, and also the concept, but everything down to detail. So, he's a designer. But he's more of the... not the old-fashion style, because there are still designers like this, but he is the typical example of the person that we picture in our head as a designer. But then there is design like we're doing in 'the Studio', which is also design: the problem is that 20 years ago this kind of design didn't exist. So, the issue now is that it's called design, but then when you're doing design for a client they don't understand what we are doing because they have this perception that we do little details and very specified objects. Then, they have been trying to call it Interaction Design, because then Interaction Design is something that displays a broader way of seeing - Interaction Design was basically created by a group of people making new... entering new fields, such as services, or installations, where you are dealing with technologies and so on. And in this, in order to do Interaction Design, you'd always be a team: a team of a technologist, a designer, even psychologist in some cases, and so on. But now, Interaction Design doesn't even work anymore as a name, because Interaction Design is so much focused on what a lot of people consider website design, or something very technological..."

Andrea: ...related with computers.

Lisen: ...related very much with computers, so...

Andrea: ...or with human-machines...

Lisen: Exactly. So, when we are saying Interaction Design, people again get very confused, so basically the problem is that we need a new word, but to introduce a new word is very difficult. Because we are doing Design... but we are also doing Interaction Design, because we are also dealing with all these things, but we're doing something beyond that, and there's not a clear conceptual work that frames that. And that's the problem.

Andrea: So, it's something new that is emerging?

[...]

Lisen: [showing agreement]... and it has been going on for about 5-10 years now, developing it, slowly, and a lot of people still working this way have difficulties explaining what they are doing. So, there's no... word.

Andrea: Yes, there's no label for...

Lisen: No. And it was easier for... well, if you see an architect - architects just continue to be architects. People have in their mind already... if you say 'architect' they'll know perfectly well: "ah, it's houses", because you have... you have something, you know, conceivable as an outcome"

(Interview, 22-07-2009).

At times I was not sure if this is a new practice emerging in the field of design, or if it is something that is concerned with their particular circumstances – the fact that they were a ‘new media’ company operating in a time of economic crisis – regardless of how representative they may be. Let us turn to the example of Smedt, a Dutch designer who was doing an internship while I was there, and who comes from a completely different design tradition and academic world – the Eindhoven University. From his viewpoint, the situation is different. He once explained to me the design approach of where he comes from and how it contrasts with ‘the Studio’. He described to me how in Eindhoven they usually work for a target group, and compared it with the more intuitive approach to design that he finds in ‘the Studio’. In Eindhoven they follow a very ‘scientific’, rational, step-by-step design process – the typical solving-problem approach. They use something similar to a market research strategy to find out about users' needs, and then they develop the prototypes in several versions and present them to users for refinement – the concept they use for it is *iteration*<sup>24</sup>. Eindhoven Academy has a strong relationship with Philips. “There you actually always design for a target group”, Smedt accounts, referring to how they carry out research to discover what are people’s needs and what they want from a product: “You make a first step with the prototype, [you add] a slightly different approach, and then you ask them again how did they like it, compared to

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<sup>24</sup> In the dictionary (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/iteration>), iteration means 1. the act of repeating; a repetition. 2. Mathematics . a. Also called successive approximation. a problem-solving or computational method in which a succession of approximations, each building on the one preceding, is used to achieve a desired degree of accuracy. b. an instance of the use of this method.

the previous one. [...] [Often this] is not about interviewing those people, but finding the right people you wanna go for [...], the target group". So he describes his university as "more towards the user-centered approach, whereas here [in 'the studio'] it's more towards an intuitive approach" (Interview, 22-07-2009).

To Smedt there is an absolute difference between an objective, "truthful" method of finding what users really want, that is, a design method to prove that a particular solution is really the best one, and a fake solution, which is called reverse engineer. But from his perspective, in 'the Studio' there are no users involved (as there are no products), there are just the clients, and that's why he thinks the approach is completely different because 'they are working on the earlier phase of the design process', thus they merely stay at the 'general stage'. So he doesn't see it as a new way of doing design, but rather as a very circumstantial condition:

Smedt: [...] here, as far as I know, it's more or less the same but it's not so much by trying to prove scientific things. What they do here is also, again, you build the prototype, you show it to the client and then you ask his opinion. So here there are actually no users involved, just the client, so they don't show any tests to users. The thing is that, basically, since you work for a client, he is the main person who should like it. So, if this guy really likes the solution, then you can do it. And occasionally you get suggestions from the client, like, "make this smaller" or something.

Andrea: Hmm. But maybe... these approaches also have to do with different kinds of products and different kinds of clients, because if you are working maybe with a big client, like Nokia or something, maybe they would ask for a user-centered approach [...]?

Smedt: No, but maybe there's also a difference in which part of the design process that you work. What happens here is that, a lot of the Ixd generation part is the very first stage, and at that point of time...

Andrea: you mean Interaction Design?

Smedt: Yeah. And in that point of time, you don't have to keep track so much of these issues, you just generate a lot of ideas, on what's possible, (...) but the further you get into the design process, the more specific your choices have to be, and then you should involve users, I think. But also here, it has always been, whatever I design, it's quite general, so then there's not so much need of a very specific answer to the question of whether that "should have been a red or another green bottom!"

Andrea: Exactly. So, [here] projects are broader, maybe. And also the conception of design, or what design is, or could be, and so on, maybe it's broader? Do you think so?

Smedt: Hmm... [hesitation] yeah... if you mean... when you say projects are broader, it's only... you are only saying that it's in their beginning, the earlier phase of the design process. But it's getting more and more specific anyway, because you cannot put a general... a general product on the market for everything, you know? In the end it has to be just a medium to use.

Andrea: Yes, exactly, that's the point, because... [...] if you are working specifically for the market, then it needs specification, as you say, and very defined ends, but the studio doesn't work so much for the market directly, it works with other kind of projects...? services, other things?...

Smedt: Yeah, but it depends on what kind of company you work for! Because I also worked in Eindhoven for Philips – of course, as Philips is (located) there in Eindhoven as well... and there, there are actually those guys who were asking all the time: "hey, did you test this, did you test that?" And how do you know that (what you are proposing is needed to users)? And maybe here, general approaches are a bit different. But also, I think that the projects we are working on are maybe less demanding in terms of research.

Whether it is a new way of designing, or whether it is something determined by the circumstances (for example, the fact that they are a small company, working with small clients and so on) remains open.

Smedt, however, later on during his stay in 'the Studio', expressed his contradictory feelings towards the tradition where he comes from, the reason behind his decision to go to Italy to do a short internship, to get a new experience on this other side of doing design: "in the end I've just decided that I wanted to design something in the way I liked, because it would just be a really cool product. (...). But people in my school would say 'no, no, you have to explain why... ', so there's also the counter-side. If you just design something really cool it might start selling like crazy anyway, hum?"

The question that Smedt raises concerning the way he sees the approach of 'the Studio' as determined by contextual factors, suggests that there is a sort of crisis of identity among the designers of 'the Studio', and as a crisis, it is something open. Thus, the idea of stories, of design being fiction seems to be their narrative, their own big fiction that seems to fill in the emptiness of meaning created by the particular and local circumstance of the failure of the Interaction Design project – and at the same time, the end of a Fordist economic regime that makes them embrace the more conceptual, creative, cognitive aspects of work. Though they say that there is a need for a new terminology, or a new concept for a new way of making design, in practice I wondered if what they do is that extraordinarily different from what is done in other areas such as in branding and advertising, where the notion of working on the *stories around* products is prevalent. For example, while talking about her move to Qatar Lisen told me that she informed her employers at the interview that the message she wants to convey to students is that

"design is equal to fiction, building scenarios and building new stories and to tell the students to be aware of the situation that is going on now, so... it's not enough knowing that they want to make a new teapot, they should be aware of the situation of the teapot, and the people using it, and... everything else that might be combined. So, basically, they are not creating anymore the teapot, they are creating the situation *around* it, and understanding the situation rather than the element. And so, they should be designing a situation and once they are designing that, the elements would appear, or apply."

Andrea: So, it's like teaching students to think about the more immaterial aspects of design...

Lisen: Yeah, creating new worlds. And that's why I call it fiction [...] I believe you have to create a new world, [...] help people to step into a sort of a dream. [...] [d]esign students, have to be able to tell a good story, [...] because a lot of design is also invisible. [...]."

(Interview, 22 July 2009).

In Lisen's opinion, Interaction Design has been considered responsible for the shift which changed the design process itself, while at the same time it has been dissolved with the design process. "The fact that Interaction Design is by now part of every design process also means that Interaction Design doesn't exist anymore", said Lisen, on another occasion<sup>25</sup>. Osvaldo is more radical in his views on this matter. He states that he doesn't even believe in Interaction Design, there only exists design – he appears very suspicious of any cutting edge trend that are labeled as new, such as Interaction Design. He believes that Interaction Design, because it is a new discipline, does not have a critical discourse of its own, as for example architecture does. Interaction Design, he argues, was very fashionable about ten years ago with the emergence of digital technologies, but now as these technologies are almost a common place in all our lives, the discipline will naturally disappear. Interaction Design has now become very dated, he claims. He believes that we should only refer to design in general and not try to pigeonhole new developments in design with specific new labels. He uses the analogy of a gay film director having his work labeled gay cinema when in fact what we should consider is whether his work is good or bad cinema. Similarly in design what we should be focusing on is whether we are dealing with good or bad design.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview carried out by a student, courtesy of Lisen. Originally in Italian: my translation.

The fact that an Interaction Design studio considers that Interaction Design is already a thing of the past, was to me greatly unexpected. Suddenly, Interaction Design becomes a history of a failed future: history is full of stories like that (Edgerton 2006: 210). Showing me an Interaction Design example in a design magazine – it was an example of very high-tech piece of architecture in South Korea, a building that changed its surface color – Osvaldo commented:

"With this, you have a clear perception that this is not the future, this is the past. It as if you look at the women collection of five years ago, and say: "ah, I remember using this... yeah, so funny!..." [...] I don't have the feeling that we are going in this [IxD] direction. This [IxD], becomes very dated. [Likewise, you will look at IxD in the future and say:] "ah, yeah, yeah, I remember... this skyscraper changed color due to changes in temperature". It's as if you see an image of a car of the 1950's - you'd say: "ah, yes! That was style!" (Osvaldo, interview, 20-03-2009)

One of the reasons he doesn't regard high-tech architecture and high-tech design very positively is because technology is too present, too visible, too active, it has all the protagonism, and surely he doesn't want to give up instrumental reason on technology. Technology justifies instrumental reason, and without instrumental reason design does not make sense. For example, referring to high-tech architecture where technology is taking all-too-much protagonism, he writes: "This is the time when technology arrives and enters the drawing table. It is never the opposite. Technology is not harnessing the designer, but rather the opposite. The designer harnesses technology, upon his desires and necessities. [...] Sophisticated and complex technology, completely hidden. The peak of complexity is in the process, therefore remains invisible to our eyes."<sup>26</sup> Thus, he considers technology an instrument of meaning, a vehicle for stories.

Despite their differences, Osvaldo shares with Lisen the conception that design is a narrative activity, and this is the image that they attempt to portray of 'the Studio'. He thinks that design is about telling stories (their motto 'form follows fiction'), in the sense that everything tells a story, everything communicates, everything is made (designed) to communicate, and so their work is to create good stories, rather than merely good objects. Objects are just one among many mediums for a good story, he says. "Nowadays, more than ever, we live of stories, not of objects, nobody needs simply objects anymore: nobody needs a car with four wheels,

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<sup>26</sup> In Design, Technology, Fiction, originally presented at: "Beyond Morphogenesis. Technion, Haifa, April 2005. (<http://interactiondesign-lab.com/cgi-bin/moin.cgi/SmsVictims/>)

as every car has four wheels now, everybody takes it for granted, so what people want from a car is a good story and so on". I asked him what about the materiality of stuff? "That is the technical side of it", he said. "The design process can change the materials to convey that message, but it's the message that it's important, not the thing in itself". Then I told him how I believed that materiality is more than the technical, but he disagrees, what he is eager to stress is that design is not a technical activity - it is a cultural, conceptual one. He classifies the work that they do as more cultural than commercial. It is in this sense that design-as-fiction works as a kind of re-enchantment, and this is concerned with two aspects: one, it is a historical context where fictions and big stories came into crisis:

**Oswaldo:**

philosophically speaking  
i grew up in a world where no big stories existed anymore.

no big tales about christianity  
no big tales about communism  
and so on.

to this extent,  
if you want  
i do use the paradigms of the so called "*pensiero debole*" (gianni vattimo, richard rorty and the likes).

i am not keen on extreme positions (like lyotard or derrida)  
[...].<sup>27</sup>

(Oswaldo, e-mail, 09/06/09)

In addition to the 'big narratives' crisis of post-modernity, there is the emptiness left by the crumbling of the Fordist world that is here suggested. Some of the effects of this phenomenon that are specific to the Italian context are already well documented by Molé (2010) and Muehlebach (2011) with regards to the world of work. In Italy, this was a particularly rapid process (Foot 2003: 138), and thus the emptiness left is substituted by the portrayal of design as a vehicle for stories. Oswaldo thinks that we are living in a world where commodities are taken for granted, so he argues that what we need is metaphors: "generally, objects, they do work, they do wear out, not because of functional things, but because of metaphorical reasons". That's why he contends that design should be concerned with

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<sup>27</sup> This layout is a reproduction of the style of Oswaldo's e-mails – which is common to other people in 'the Studio'.

the metaphoric/fictional, rather than with objects. But what sort of fictions are we discussing and who produces them?

In one of his texts, Osvaldo offers this notion of fiction, "In architecture, today as well as in the past 3000 years, the core business is fiction. Without fictions no one would build the pyramids, the European medieval churches and monasteries, no Zen gardens and Buddhist shrines. The Brooklyn Bridge and the Crystal Palace are images of a Modernist fiction. Fiction makes the world moving on"<sup>28</sup>. He clearly refers to fiction as the collective imaginary. But there are two different notions of fiction at play, which are sometimes contradictory: the creative design fiction – that is, the story or metaphoric meaning that designers consciously and intentionally attribute to objects *before conception* (the fiction that is built *around* objects that Lisen was referring to) – and the notion of collective, cultural fiction that generates around a thing *after its conception* – the way things are appropriated culturally, so to speak – this is the fiction that Osvaldo refers to.

Osvaldo describes the designer as an antenna of those cultural narratives. He says it is purely cultural: 'we don't speak: its culture that speaks through us. If I say "I do believe I have an idea" – no, that's wrong: (it is) culture, the spirit of the time (that) uses me as a medium' he says, suggesting that the designers' imagination cannot be separated from a cultural one. The question is if the fiction he refers to is the idea that precedes the project, that is, the designer's idea (creating a story, a scenario) – a mental thing – or is it rather something that exists *outside* the collective imaginary, the cultural ideas are somehow independent of the designer? This is a question that I will tackle throughout the first two chapters: 1, Conceptuality and 2, Fiction.

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.interactiondesign-lab.com/cgi-bin/moin.cgi/SmsVictims/DesignTechnologyFiction>; the text is originally in English, and I reproduce it as it is; I am not responsible for the English.

# 1. Conceptuality

## The ‘practice’ inside: relationships between the abstract and the specific in design

During Milan Design Week, Gualtiero came to the city with his students from Delft to present a project where they had been involved, with ‘the Studio’, for the event: it was called Jukebox<sup>29</sup>. Four international design schools had been invited to rethink the collective fruition of music, exhibiting their prototypes in doing so, together with an installation of old jukeboxes, in *Triennale* design museum throughout design week. Parallel to the exhibition there was a ‘space-event’: the prototype had been installed in a bus for the public. This bus concept, despite intentions, was not as successful as expected with the public. Gualtiero told me that they were very proud of their Jukebox project, which was a huge success from a design point of view, but it didn’t work for those who experienced it on the bus (the public) as “*it was too conceptual*”: people would go into the bus without noticing it nor showing engagement with it. I was happy to hear this confession, because I too felt it had been ‘too conceptual’: there was so much going on during design week that I actually missed the bus, but I went to the Jukebox exhibition several times and I also experienced the set-up. The only attractive feature for me was the old jukeboxes that visitors were actually allowed to play – I had a lot of fun playing vintage Italian songs of Pati Pravo – but regarding the prototypes and what they were trying to achieve, that being the aim of the exhibition, was well beyond my understanding.

This ‘too conceptual’ example is a classic vignette about the relationships that designers establish between ideas and the world, intentions/plans and reality/people. I will now delve in to how this distance is worked out.

Throughout my fieldwork I was often concerned with the way ideas precede practice in designers’ approaches to their projects, as well as with what seemed to me a preference for abstractions over the empirical and the ‘existing’. In this chapter I

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.inmilano.com/eventi/jukebox>

detail examples where work on those several forms of abstractions is being performed – either through concepts, general categories or maps that are worked out in advance of local context, place and material objects, among other factors. This particular concern also gave me access to a local point of view on what is considered a good relationship between the abstract and the concrete – the way these designers distinguish between a good and bad ‘conceptual process’ is concerned with ways of relating with the ‘concrete’ and ‘empirical’ though in different terms than what I was used to. Their emphasis on ‘conceptuality’ creates specific relationships between objects and ideas, the abstract and the specific. As I will illustrate, there are specific conceptions of abstract and empirical worthy of attention – to put it differently, the relationship between the abstract and the empirical can mean something else in a field outside anthropology. Likewise, the definition and use of the term ‘practice’ within the field of design differs from that in anthropology.

## **Performative conceptuality**

Within the ‘practice approach’ usually there is prioritization of practices and embodiment over mind. “Practices, in sum, displace mind as the central phenomenon in human life” (Schatzki 2001: 11). What about the practices of the ‘mind’, that is, the practices that surround conceptuality? The aim of this chapter is to extend the ‘practice approach’ to concepts: I will look at how ‘conceptuality’ far from being an abstract process, is actually enacted in multiple ways.

Trying to grasp what is considered generative in design, I will look at the practices of concepts, the practices where ideas remain intentionally ideas. Once we abandon an utilitarian (Crabtree & Rodden 2002), technology-oriented conception of innovation and listen to designers’ own stories of where does the ‘new’ comes from, we’ll find a world different from that of programs of action and anti-programs, preset scripts and delegations into non-humans actors. Thus, in contribution to STS/ANT theories and practice approaches, this chapter draws attention to the importance of the dramatic/performative as part of that which is created within processes of innovation.

## *Milano mi fa male*

“ (...) situated action turns on local interactions between the actor and contingencies that, while they are made accountable to a plan, remain essentially outside of the plan’s scope. Just as it would seem absurd to claim that a map in some strong sense controlled the traveller’s movements through the world, it is wrong to imagine plans as controlling actions. On the other hand, the question of how a map is produced for specific purposes, how in any actual instance it is represented vis-à-vis the world, and how its use is a resource for traversing the world, is a reasonable and productive one. In the last analysis, it is in the interaction of representation and represented where, so to speak, the action is” (Suchman 1987: 188-9).

About one or two weeks before design week, I approached Flora, an intern at ‘the Studio’ who had recently finished a design degree at ‘the School’. She was writing an article with Osvaldo for *Specchio* (*La Stampa*, a national daily newspaper) about the current edition of *Salone del Mobile*, Milan Design Week, which is also the annual international design fair and one of the worlds most important design events. The article highlighted the design projects they found interesting, especially those with the economic crisis in mind. As I didn’t know much about the event, Flora described it to me: every year, parallel to the main fair, which is for business, there is another part which is the *Fuori Salone*. This is where, according to Flora, one can find “more interesting projects and installations” – this is the cultural side of the *Salone*, she told me, composed of several interventions in different parts of the city, usually installations, exhibitions or objects. It is where we can find more playful projects that are less commercial, like those which ‘the Studio’ are involved in. I asked her how do we distinguish design objects from art. According to Flora, the main difference is not conceptual: design objects are produced to be sold, to be consumed, to be used, they have the market in mind. So, the *Fuori Salone*, she adds, has a creative aim, but it is also a way of publicizing new talent, which may interest producers and industry representatives.

The dualism between the *Salone del Mobile* mainstream business fair and the alternative cultural events (*Fuori-Salone/Outside-Exhibition*) simulates the division, and at the same time mutual dependence of mainstream industrial design in Milan and what is considered more cultural/conceptual design. One part of the article suggested this idea, referring to design week as a sort of secular carnival where...

“For one entire week the city is transformed. In addition to the trade sector (usually concentrated in the spaces of the Exhibition, in Rho), the Lombard metropolis fills with hundreds of all kinds of events: situations, objects, events, performances, art, services, trade, business that turns into culture (and culture that turns into business). Everything is ruled by this vaguely incestuous relationship between *il Salone* as such and the so-called *Fuori-Salone*, a dual relationship that renders the Milan exhibition unique. In the exhibition, designed by Fuksas, millions of exhibitors find hospitality in that which is the reference window of a globalized market that spreads to the remotest corners of the world. The Exhibition is the proper market, the physical place where transactions of millions of euros are done, the place where (roughly speaking) money flows and contracts are celebrated. This market, though, in order to live, needs the *Fuori-Saloni* which is the place of the democratic culture, spread through an urban scale through an infinity of different places and involving all kinds of minds and intelligences.”<sup>30</sup>

It is in this ‘vaguely incestuous’ relationship between the ‘cultural’ and business that ‘the Studio’ and ‘the School’ operate. These ‘more cultural’, less commercial projects are not divided from the world of business as if they were art, they are rather exercises of creativity in potential, or a way of selling potency – the ideology or ethos of potency is an aspect that some describe as particularly valued within the ‘cutting-edge’ companies of the ‘new economy’ that explore future possibilities; it is an ethos that emphasizes what might be, rather than what is (Sennett 2006: 156; 158). The project that I talk about next illustrates this idea.

Another article in the same newspaper, describes a project where Flora was involved: it was the project that ‘the Studio’, together with ‘the School’, had been preparing specially for the Milan fair, called *Milano mi fa male* (‘Milan hurts me’). ‘The School’ had been invited by the organization of the *Salone del Mobile* to present a project concerned with objects with a more playful, non-commercial character. The project, curated by Osvaldo (along with someone from DDN, a free design magazine), consisted of an invitation to other design schools around the world to present design proposals for Milan based on the topic of hospitality:

“around twenty schools (national and international) will converge in Milan to participate in the construction of *milano mi fa male*, a thematic map about hospitality. Thanks to the collaboration with DDN, [Antonia L].<sup>31</sup> and [M. P.]<sup>32</sup> have mapped a hundred ‘special’ places: for each of those there are ad hoc

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<sup>30</sup> “*Il Salone al tempo della crisi*”, *Specchio, La Stampa*, Nr. 580, 28th February 2009, my translation from Italian.

<sup>31</sup> A fictitious name for a person from the studio I will later return to.

<sup>32</sup> The person from DDN free.

projects in development that will be prototyped and experimented during the week of the *Salone*. The various projects will inflect the verb ‘to host’ (*ospitare*) using the designer’s typical instruments ranging from product [design] to the operations of guerrilla marketing, events, performances, installations” (Flora, in another article in the same journal, my translation).<sup>33</sup>

The project *Milano mi fa male* starts with an interesting metaphor. As Antonia explains in an online interview, *Milano mi fa male* is primarily a narrative, an extraordinary and tormented love story between a city and its inhabitants who love it, hate it, desire it, dream with it, while it remains unmoved, cold, wicked, fascinating and – obviously – slightly evil (online interview<sup>34</sup>). The inspiration for the name derived from a song of a local band, ‘Alconauti’, who were invited to perform at the closing party of the project<sup>35</sup>.

Flora was also drawing the map that marked the “100 special, unusual places in the city”, which would be distributed freely in the main public spaces of the city in the design magazine called DDN – which comes out every three months and is distributed all over Italy; it was in this publication that, together with the map, details for the public would be found – the concept, list of projects, and instructions on where to find the calendar of events online. The idea was that these are “places where one could find a different Milan, not the one we usually imagine” – beautiful places, unknown places, strange ones. The project departs thus from a dualism between the existing city – the one people know – and the imagined city – the one people dream up.

Regarding the project, in the aforementioned online interview, Osvaldo was asked how would he wish the city to be changed. His answer was “Will is power. Rather than spending time imagining how I would like the city to change, I find easier and wiser to change it actively (with the projects we do in ‘the Studio’, in ‘the School’ and so forth...) (my translation from the Italian)”<sup>36</sup>. This intention of change, however, is revealed through the process as something contradictory, as it turns out as being an imaginary kind of change rather than a material one. It is this dynamic that brings an interesting relationship between the imagined, represented city and the

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<sup>33</sup> “Scuole, la meglio gioventù”, *Specchio - La Stampa*, Nr 580, 28th February 2009; my translation from the Italian.

<sup>34</sup> Published on March 30th 2009, by Gabriele Ferraresi; my translation from the Italian.

<sup>35</sup> The video of this song: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JqVALo-jo0>

<sup>36</sup> The original: “Volere = potere. Da cui, anziché passare il tempo a immaginare come vorrei che cambiasse la città, trovo più semplice e sensato, cambiarla fattivamente (con i progetti che facciamo in xxx (‘the Studio’), in xxx (‘the School’) e così via...)”

real one, and moreover, the relationship they establish between the abstract and the specific.

The instructions from ‘the School’ to the other participating design schools were that each school should choose one place from the list and imagine a project for that place:

“a project able to reveal further things about that place, the city, the world we live in. The theme for the design exercise should be: ‘to host/hospitality’. (each school should develop what they think is more appropriate, it can be a pillow to be more comfortable during the subway ride. Or a temporary shelter on top of a tree, some cell-phone based service where you get xyz special info etc.)”<sup>37</sup>

Referring to these events that would be represented in a “conceptual” map of the city, Antonia wrote that there would be “installations, performances, objects, temporary exhibitions. In the first place they are imagined and represented in a map that will be attached to DDN/free *Salone* edition, and then, during the *Salone del Mobile*, they will be really prototyped in those places in the city” (ibid, my italics).

I was immediately curious about this project and specially interested in following those prototypes, as it was an opportunity to observe *in practice* the difference between conceptual design and art that Flora had told me about. I was also curious about what the word ‘conceptual’ means here. So I promptly volunteered to help with this project. This was during design week, where a lot of things would be happening. So I had to choose a point of view and thus, instead of trying to follow the *Salone* events randomly – design week would be quite overwhelming with many concurring events – I decided that I wanted to follow the back-stages, the work of people in ‘the School’ and in ‘the Studio’ in this particular project. I chose to go to ‘the School’ everyday, as it was where everyone from ‘the Studio’ was. I then followed and helped them. One of the tasks was to fold the maps that would be distributed.

The map was already complete when I came aboard, meaning that the proposals/interventions were already included in the map so I could not follow those processes from implementation. However, I expected to see the results – the reactions to those events and installations; to be more concrete, to see if people would really follow the map to search for those ‘special places’ and see the projects

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<sup>37</sup> Retrieved from the blog: <http://designblog.uniandes.edu.co/blogs/dise2621/2009/01/26/mw-milano-multiverso/> (accessed in September 2012).

that were prepared for them. Although I chose to follow the people of ‘the Studio’ in their backstage activities (I followed Flora and Antonia, mainly), I was also very motivated to search for some of those places, from a visitor’s perspective. Although in practice, it turned out to be difficult.

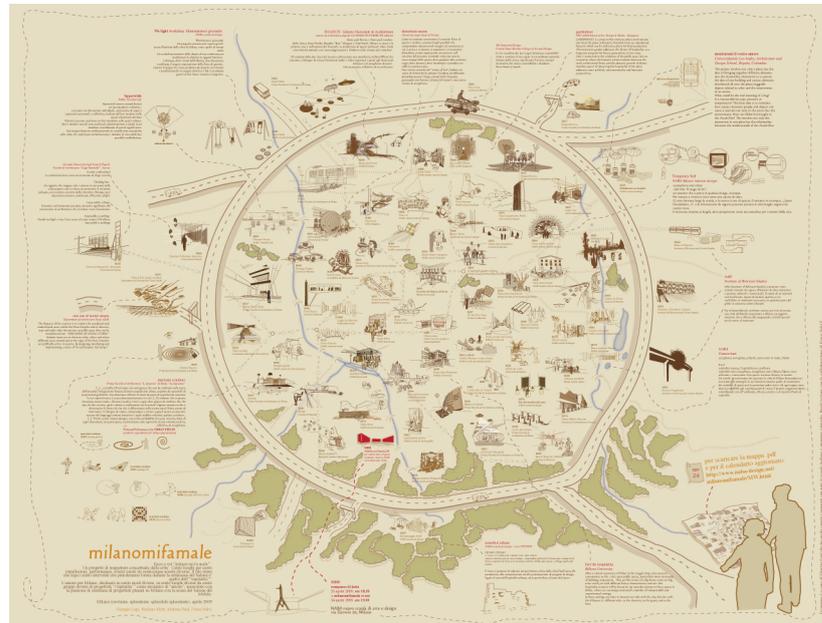


Figure 1: Map of the project *milanomifamale*

I was even more curious about these events as I found the map particularly difficult and confusing to read, and thus I wondered about who the public was and how would it receive it. But I realized that the project was not conceived for the public, for the ‘outside’.

Each event/installation corresponds to a place, a real place in the city. However, because this is not an accurate representation of the space – as the map was inspired by medieval maps – the areas in the map where the interventions are located do not correspond to a precise physical location. The map is neither fully ‘real’, nor fully ‘imagined’. It contains all the projects, as a list-like collection of projects but the main reason why it is so confusing is concerned with functional ambiguity: it serves both as *a map* (marking out the locations of installations) and *a report* of the activities of the project, it is both the instrument and the output. Thus, for someone from ‘the outside’, it is not clear if it is meant to function as a map for finding those places, which in practice is very difficult if not impossible, or if is an

outline of the project itself. In fact, it is meant to be both simultaneously, and later I understood that this is the main reason why it is considered a ‘conceptual’ map, and in that sense, it works as both a model for, and a model of reality (Geertz 1973: 92-93).

The project creates expectations about the ‘real’ events, as in Antonia’s aforementioned presentation of the project. Actually, there were instructions in DDN on where to go to find a calendar of events during design week. There was also a list of projects with their respective addresses – although not necessarily all the projects corresponded to an event in a physical location, because some had been developed as models inspired in those places. However, I realized that it was pointless to search for projects in those parts of Milan because the emphasis was on students’ experiences of those places and the aim was *the process*: giving students an opportunity to discover their own versions of Milan and present their visions of hospitality. Also, most of them were ephemeral events. The output of those processes, in that sense, did not matter as much as the process itself, thus, there was not much for me to follow. This was deceiving, as it seemed to me that the intentions were one thing, and the practice was quite another. The emphasis was not on the effect of the interventions on the places, but on the conceptual impact of the ideas in the exhibition within ‘the School’.

One of the ways that the curators presented the project *Milano mi fa male* was as “an extraordinary love story between a city and its inhabitants”. However, these experiences had nothing to do with the inhabitants, since inhabitants were indeed incredibly absent – unless we consider the students as their ‘inhabitants’, or their experiences one way of ‘inhabiting’ the city – inhabiting it in creative ways. However, inhabiting the city in a design way is a particularly detached one.

For example, on one of those occasions when I followed Flora and colleagues who were in the school folding maps, I followed the discussion of one of these proposals. Two lecturers, Antonia and Hartvig who I knew from ‘the Studio’, entered the room to discuss a late proposal – a student came in to show them his idea, in order to see if it could also be included in the project *Milano mi fa male*, even though the map was already finished. I asked to join them. The student started to show a video he made to present his concept – he was inspired by a train station in Milan, Lambrate, and so he recounted how he *observed the place*, mentioning that what intrigued him most about it was the fact that people cross paths but remain strangers,

never taking the chance to interact. Thus, he said that he identified *a problem* (a problem for whom, I wondered) and he developed a device specifically for that ‘problem’: an object made of two plastic cups connected by a tube, which whenever used turns a light on – the tube lights up when two people are talking.

He explained he thought of this because the existent communication devices, such as mobile phones or walkie talkies, are unable to resolve this kind of ‘problem’, as they are meant for people who already know each other but are absent, while this one, in contrast, requires both parties to be present and in each others company, thus allowing the possibility of strangers to communicate with each other.

The lecturers, who were excited with ‘the concept’, accepted the idea very enthusiastically. Hartvig commented that the student did something they appreciate particularly, which was starting by “reading the place”. But I wondered what “reading the place” means in this particular context, because that object was not meant for that *specific* place, but for any *general* place – it could be for any train station or any similar urban context where people cross paths without communicating. The lack of communication between strangers is a general characteristic common to urban places in general, not specific to Milan, nor Lambrate. So I asked them if it was meant for *real* use? According to Antonia, “it *simulates* an extreme situation, that is why it is so interesting: it is a *conceptual* object”.

Although ‘conceptual’, the object works, technically speaking – and they make sure to test it first. I found from other examples (that I detail further in this chapter) that it is this paradox that they find fascinating: the fact that it does what it proposes to although paradoxically it is not meant to do anything apart from making us think, it does not do anything in practical terms *outside* the self-justifying ‘conceptual’ system where it is developed for. In that sense, it is an object that *simulates* change. For example, Antonia also said she quite liked the fact that it turns a light on, as it makes one feel like *as if on a stage*. The idea of the stage is actually quite revealing, as the way the project develops and the notion of change that is being deployed is actually performative.

Likewise, Hartvig liked the fact that the student followed the typical industrial design process for developing ‘something conceptual’ and non-industrial. The typical industrial design process (or method) refers to a linear sequence of steps that is also the conventional design process: identifying a problem, and then

developing a prototype that is the solution for that problem<sup>38</sup>. Another explanation designers give about the difference between an artistic and a conceptual design object is that the conceptual design object still follows a design *method* – it is an object meant as a solution for ‘a problem’, even though the problem may not always be a practical one because it is explorative in finding ‘new’ questions. However, as I will further show in this chapter, the *method* is more about the representation and communication of the design process than anything else – it is a visually conventionalized procedure with a specific performative value – which actually contradicts Osvaldo’s argument about the role of user-centered methods in previous chapters: his idea is that user-centered methods are used only for communication with the client; ironically, the traditional design method (design-centered) is used for the same purpose, with the only difference that this is a communication that is meant for the *inside* community of designers, rather than the *outside* world (of clients, companies, business in general).

So I was surprised in the end to find that the interaction of this object with Lambrate train station was of little importance, despite it being the place of inspiration and supposedly where it was designed for. Lambrate train station (concrete, specific physical place in Milan) ended up as a mere medium for a conceptual higher level of abstraction, and in that sense, something passive and neutral in the process (in the sense that its specificity has no transformative role in the process), which is an aspect that intrigued me. This was no exception as the same could be said for the other projects. ‘Reading the place’ is thus concerned with representational knowledge of the place, for the knowledge of the place substitutes the place. ‘Reading the place’ is concerned with the transformative role of the general and abstract rather than the specific.

Although this proposal was not included on the map, which was already complete, it was later included in the exhibition at ‘the School’, which gathered all the projects for *Milano mi fa male*. I had the opportunity to go to this particular exhibition on campus. There were over one hundred projects and many potential examples so it was impossible for me to follow them all, giving an exhaustive description, also they were already finished when I started to participate in the project, so I will just briefly mention some examples. The

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<sup>38</sup> For an interesting account of designers’ own description of the rational design process see Yaneva (2009: 12-13).

events/performances/installations were very heterogeneous, and ranged from very different media and created very different outputs. Some were individual student proposals, such as the one exemplified before, while others were workshops and academic assignments; some were meant for the public (of design week) and involved a degree of public interaction, while others were more ‘conceptual’. What I am interested to highlight is the specificities of the relationship with the city.

My overall impression was that these were imaginary events; they were proposals, thus existing only virtually. The majority of the design schools were from outside Milan: some were from universities within Italy and others were from abroad, an international context. Although the schools had been invited to make their real prototypes in Milan – and some did – as I said, the outcome of the project was mostly focused on students’ experiences rather than a transformation in those places.

Milan is the financial capital of Italy. In 2009, the economic crisis inspired the imaginations of designers, and so this was an iterant topic in the projects done either by ‘the Studio’ or at ‘the School’. This aspect was more present in the projects of ‘the School’ presented in the exhibition than in the proposals of schools from outside Milan. For example, MI33 (a project from ‘the School’s’ *Futurarium* students) – one aspect of Milan is its lack of green spaces. “Piazza Affari, between Via Bocchetto and Via del Bollo. The Milan’s stock market, the ‘business’ area, the beating heart of finance, on the back of the heavy traffic of Piazza Cordusio. Project: *Siamo tutti al verde*” (We are all broke). *Essere al verde* is an expression that in Italian means to be broke; to be bankrupt, to have no money; but literally, it means being in greenery (in the sense of being in the wild, with vegetation, in the fields, nature or countryside).

“This project has the aim of equipping the front of Pallazzo Mezzanotte (Milan’s stock market) with a wide green garden. Regarding the economic crisis of the last period we thought that the title ‘*siamo tutti al verde*’ (we are all in the wild/we are all broke) would be adequate to this type of performance and, at the same time, would play with a double meaning. Anyone who would pass the piazza would notice a different environment, cozier but overall, more colorful. Everyone would be invited to enjoy a moment of relaxation, in a point of Milan that is certainly not the place for tranquility. We will seek to create a photographic set where managers and others will be photographed during their pleasant break. The installation makes use of hammocks, deckchairs, plants and most importantly, a nice green grassy mantle. Completing the work there will be a video installation projected in [‘the school’] documenting the work stages and manager poses” (Appendage to DDNFree n. 6, 2009; my translation).

The object presented at the exhibition was a portable green-space, a bag intended specifically for the Milan stock market area. However, the lack of green spaces is common to a great quantity of cities throughout the world and their respective stock markets – such an idea does not presuppose any kind of special interaction with what is specific to the place that they propose, nor an active engagement with it, more than a symbolic one.



**Figure 2:** Portable green-space in exhibition, project *Siamo tutti al verde* (photograph: Andrea Gaspar)

Looking at some of the proposals for those ‘special places of Milan’, and trying to figure out the relationship that was established with those places, I realized that they were designed in an abstract way – similarly to the Lambrate station in the project that I already described, those places appear as just neutral background, thus the relationship established is particularly distanced. I learned that this is part of the designers’ way of interacting with place. Supposedly they were ‘interventions’, however, although they were planned to be installations in those places which may themselves create those relationships – and actually be made there, and have effects

– in fact there were not many physical interventions, as the majority were fictional and conceptual, meant to happen within the exhibition space. Some of these proposals were done by students who had never been to Milan so although these places exist and correspond to real locations, the physical places in the projects become virtual references against an empty background, where Milan starts to look like a fictional city. And the fact that some of the proposals were actually done by students from and in Milan who in fact have an empirical relationship with the city does not change this way of approaching place and context – the relationship is no less abstract. The projects are based on general ideas about Milan that often do not require interaction with the place. Thus, the abstract city works in a parallel way with the concrete one, as two separate layers of the same reality – where the imagined one is given more importance than the ‘real’ one.

For example, another interesting project (MI91) was a workshop called ‘one hour of social utopia’ intended for the disused space around the new Milan fair (designed by M. Fuksas); the workshop was a student assignment from the University of Texas<sup>39</sup>. The project is described as:

“15 students that design, develop and produce a series of temporary ‘social utopian test strips’ to explore the peripheral, non-interventioned areas around the Fair area. [The aim is] also to discover with maps and video a possible space that can be transformed with one hour of social utopia. There will be temporary stands, performances and other forms of social interaction with the people and with all that happens around and inside the Fair” (appendage to DDNFree n. 6, 2009; my translation).

Curiously, on the basis of intervention is an idea of ‘space’ rather than ‘place’ – space as a neutral background.

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<sup>39</sup> It was a course on the responsibility of Peter Lang. <http://www.petertlang.net/courseworks/e-co-mmunity-spring-2009-italy/>.



**Figure 3:** Exhibition label of the project “One hour of social utopia” (photograph: Andrea Gaspar)



**Figure 4:** Garments used in the project “One hour of social utopia” (photograph: Andrea Gaspar)

One cannot ignore that these performances actually took place in Milan and that some of the projects possibly create relationships with the places and that

possibly those relationships generate effects beyond the designers' intentions. However, the relationship that is established with the city is quite peculiar: it is predominantly a distanced one and of an inspirational kind, from designers to designers.

Another project that was presented by students of Milan and where this relationship with abstract space is more evident was called 'MIville, a visible view of an invisible setting'<sup>40</sup> – an idea developed by students of 'the School' for Via Cascia, the private complex where 'the Studio' is located. It presented a catalogue that represented an imaginary setting that was distributed during Milan Design Week. This project was inspired by Lars Von Trier's film *Dogville*, a reference that is used very often (see also in the next chapter).

The fact that they use this film so often as a reference is due to the specificity of the scenery that consists only of drawings on the ground, white chalk outlines which have big labels on them, for example indicating the name of the streets. The plot develops *inside* this scenery that sets the self-contained world of the story (the set of a 1930's American town). The scenery is not just an aesthetic detail. The scenery is the stage, it is all that is (there is no outside). Recalling John L. Austin (*How to do things with words*, 1962), the words and outlines of the set do not merely describe or represent an outside world, they are words and outlines *doing* things. But the 'things' that those words and outlines 'do' remain curiously inside the medium, their practical effects are only valid inside the fiction – outside it, they do nothing. For this reason, *Dogville* is in many ways a metaphor for design – for their particular concept of design – and specially, in regards to this chapter, it is also a metaphor for the relationships between the abstract (general, universal) and the specific, which is also the big challenge of the film. The *Dogville* set is also an anti-place: Von Trier, a Danish man making a film about America, a country he had never been to, remarked "it could be a place anywhere".<sup>41</sup> The signs and outlines of the scenery substitute 'real' life or reference to any form of distinguishing character, it is a space that could be anywhere (and therefore nowhere), it is the substitution of the imagined over the real. But the point is that it is this intentional absence of specificity that allows the spectator to imagine a place for himself. The project

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<sup>40</sup> Some more pictures in a blog: <http://www.coroflot.com/mayelamujica/MIville>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/21/movies/dogville-it-fakes-a-village.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed 12-12-2012)

*Milano mi fa male* does likewise, and actually plays with this idea: the absence of specificity is also what allows the designers to imagine a new setting for the city, or a new city.

Similarly to *Dogville*, the Via Cascia space in MIville project served as a backdrop for drawings on the ground demarcating the different spaces. This illustrates the relationship designers establish with place (place-as-space), where the place of Via Cascia is detached from its particularities to become an abstract, conceptual, virtual space. It is also an example of self-referentiality: this is one of the projects that was not made for visitors – the only thing a visitor could see was the outlines on the ground.



Figure 5

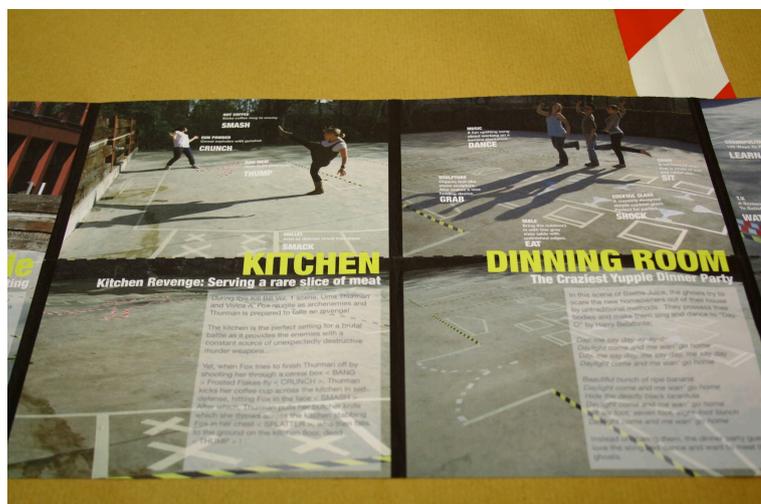


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figures 5 to 8: Fold catalogue display of MIville (photographs: Andrea Gaspar)

A project that contrasts somehow with this one was a regatta of Origami boats for one of the canals (Naviglio della Martesana). This project was actually conceived for the visitors' experience of the place (MI34); however, the relationship with the place is still a rather curious one. One of the students who participated in this group described how the 'recognition of the place' happened:

“This was a school assignment. I was doing an MA in Industrial Design in Central Saint Martins, London (1st year) and I was contacted by xx [‘the School’ in Milan] to participate in the event. As far as I know, it was xx [‘the School’] themselves who specified the places where we would intervene. The

class was divided into groups of 5 and each group was given a place, both groups and places were determined by random selection. We had three Italians in the class that helped a little bit in our search, but the recognition of the place was done through google maps and images.

Our idea for the intervention came very fast. We were given a canal area with a pedestrian space along the periphery, therefore we wanted to do something that would not only make people stop at some point to notice the place, but also create an emotional attachment. That emotional attachment was creating an origami boat where it was possible to write wishes or future dreams, to put it on the water and follow it gliding down the canal, on a calm and contemplative walkway. The day before the intervention we went to the place in order to choose the best point for our intervention and to check if any adjustments to our plans were needed, but it all went well.” (e-mail 07-09-2009, my translation from Portuguese)

It is revealing that in this last example, the place was initially assessed and analyzed with the use of google maps and images. Interestingly, in the proposals for the mapped ‘special places’ of Milan, the relationship established with those places is a virtual one. Space becomes just a container for the projects, and so it needs the recognition of a physical place and then an actual visit to the place to implement the idea. But there is no exploration of the actual place for its real potentialities.

The purpose and spirit of the project *Milano mi fa male*, from the design point of view, was to create distance from the city as it is, so that one can engage in an imagined one. That is why the project is characterized as a *conceptual* project, with a *conceptual* map, made of *conceptual* performances/events/design installations.

As for the map, I did not see anyone follow it to reach the events. So what difference does the map make? And why the reference to a real city with real places? The map, just like Dogville’s scenery, makes something virtual paradoxically visible. I learned that what designers appreciate and find particularly clever is precisely that paradox. The map ended up as the ‘product’ of the project that was presented to the ‘public’ of the *Salone* and it was published in several media. Thus, the main ‘intervention’ (change) of the project was actually the map. And ‘the public’ for the project was other designers. The people in the exhibition – all connected somehow to the world of ‘the School’ and ‘the Studio’ – commented how ‘how conceptual’ it was. Something beyond ordinary, mainstream design work.

As I progressively learned, this virtuality is concerned with a specific *vision* that designers of ‘the Studio’ share, it is not something specific to the designers of Milan, but it is shared by other designers from other parts of the world (there were

students from several schools around the world participating, including ‘central’ ones such as the Royal College of Arts in London). This *vision* is: never think of projects as directed to people, innovation is key. Projects are ‘good’ not because people like them, but because designers like them. Lisen echoes that view: ‘if an idea is good to me, then it should be good to anyone’. Another argument that I heard is that in design, it is more important to be new than to be good because new is for them (designers), whereas good is for whom? Their idea is that it is impossible to know what people want, since wants can be contradictory, so they say ‘we will never know’. Rather than concerning with people’s wants, projects are created with innovation in mind, assuming that if the proposal is really ‘new’ it will sooner or later be understood and be adopted by ‘the people’. Innovation is therefore seen as an independent, abstract and self-justifiable enterprise.

Thus, although *Milano mi fa male* is a project that proposes change – Osvaldo talked of changing the city *actively* – ironically the projects it gathered did not change anything. The result was not ‘real’ interventions in the city, nor practical engagement with the public, but a conceptual map, and conceptual proposals in an exhibition on campus. I am sure that most of the people in Milan did not even notice *Milano mi fa male*, apart one or two examples which actually invited the engagement of the audience, as it is for example the case of the Origami boats. The kind of ‘change’ that is involved is change that happens on the ‘conceptual’ level of imagination. One sense of the word ‘conceptual’ is that change is a matter of performance – this is what it means to be conceptual – rather than effective, real change.

This idea was exciting, but I was disappointed that it all remained abstract, showing no signs of engagement with the concrete places and its inhabitants. However, they did not see it that way – I learned that it was not their aim to interact with people nor with ‘real’ places in first place. Conceptual projects are by definition separated from concerns such as practical consequences, real people, and interaction with the public. Conceptuality is designers’ creative freedom to do anything they want to do without any of those constraints or social compromises (such as user-centered approaches), which are considered an obstacle to creativity and innovation. That is the reason why, from the design point of view, there is a necessary distance to keep from the specificities of places and real people with their real concerns and desires.

Thus, despite being completely invisible to the people of Milan, nobody in the design school was disappointed with the project, quite the contrary, everyone I met in the exhibition and party was very proud of the ‘conceptuality’ of *Milano mi fa male*. There was, however, inspirational, subjective change – change as something that happens *inside*, rather than *outside*. It is to this particular notion of change that I turn next.



**Figure 9:** The map of *milanomifamale* reproduced in large dimensions and displayed over a table in the exhibition (photograph: Andrea Gaspar)

## Specific notions of abstract vs. concrete

Some days later, I went to ‘the School’ to attend a session of students’ presentations of their theses<sup>42</sup>. I had been invited by Osvaldo, who would be commenting on the works together with the supervisor of the theses, on the topic of sound. The projects concerned the use of Interaction Design in order to produce an innovative sound installation in specific Milan spaces, creating a relationship between space and sound. Among several presentations there was one that stood out: MyTube, which received particular attention from lecturers and students alike. Again, just like in the previous communicative device, there is an emphasis in its

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<sup>42</sup> 29th of May, 2009.

simulative potential: presented by project instigator Mirko, MyTube is presented as a chat *simulator*.

“MyTube is a simple project that is born from the desire to re-establish direct contact between people and to curtail the virtual distances that alienate people. [Mirko] came up with the idea of an installation to be put in a public space, which invites people to interact with each other and have fun. The idea is to simulate a situation similar to that of a chat, but one where a visual contact between the subjects is kept. (...) The installation is made of a tangle of tubes that transport peoples’ messages. The tubes branch off in several directions and users dialogue with each other without knowing who their interlocutor is” (my translation from the text in [abitare.it](http://www.abitare.it)<sup>43</sup>).

The concept is similar to an online chat, the only difference is that conversation is made with real sound and people are present in the same physical room, but without knowing whom they are talking to. It was classified as ‘highly conceptual’. The reasons for this, as far as I understood, are because it is a proposal of an intriguing object which is a working device. Once again, they ensure that all objects are fully functional and do what they propose to do, in this case: communicate, so again it can be seen as functional though useless.

Oswaldo was delighted that the student, Mirko, used his own grandmother to test the prototype – as I learnt afterwards, this is concerned with a particular notion of specific: it is the model-making process itself that is specific, not what it refers to, as design models and prototypes are not representational, descriptive devices, they are rather for thinking through (Harvey 2007; Yaneva 2008).<sup>44</sup> These prototypes are not models as they do not establish a relationship with the external, descriptive world, but with the subjectivity and imagination of its creator – they are abductors of the creator’s agency (see Gell 1998) within a model of creativity as an internalized process (Leach 2007; I refer to this model in more detail in Chapter 4).

So in fact, they like to emphasize the *specificity* of the process – which they do through the prototype working as an abductor of the creative process that the

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.abitare.it/highlights/my-tube/> (accessed in May 2011)

<http://mytube0.wordpress.com/tesi/> (with videos)

<sup>44</sup> Drawing on Latour, Harvey (2007) describes engineering models as “quasi-mutable mobiles”, stressing “their capacity to carry the intention to stabilize both description and practice (as standard informational forms), while at the same time operating as a communicational tool that aims to be entirely flexible and open to becoming something else”. Also Yaneva (2008) stresses the role of models in architecture as not just representational tools but as participants in the design process, highlighting the way their physicality makes them tell more than other (digital) devices. But the models I describe are not mediating objects, neither they are committed to the material interventions than the ones that Harvey and Yaneva describe. In that sense, they are perhaps best described as prototypes in the sense of abductors of futurity, as Jiménez & Estallela (2010b) put it, rather than models – they do not aim for stabilization, they are “both a means and end of social reproduction” (2010a). More than mediators, prototypes work as abductors of potential.

‘creator’ went through – and they like it when the questions emerge from *specific* situations generated by that process, rather than from general ideas. Thus, the fact that Mirko situated his video and prototype experiment in his home with his family, using his mother and grandmother to test it, is a detail that offers a sense of concrete, specific experience, apart from abstract general questions and problems. In that sense, it is not something detached from concrete experience – although his own. And indeed, as in architecture, ‘making and thinking happen together’ (Yaneva 2009: 56). However, in terms of content, or reference (what it actually proposes to create) the project does not aim to cause any real change, rather than a conceptual, imagined one. Thus, this is still a process where reality and imagination are separated, but what is preferred is work on an imagination level, ‘as if’ there was no other level to work on. It is in this sense that there is no ‘outside’, there is not a process of ‘gaining reality’ similar to the one described by Latour in the Aramis project (1996). Here, representation *is* reality.

During the break of the session I met Osvaldo, who asked me what I thought. I told him I found everything very interesting but I was wondering why they found the MyTube project particularly successful. He explained that in the first place, because he [Mirko, the student] is working with a physical thing, it is not an *abstract* idea – there is a prototype that he worked on continuously, experimenting, making a video with his grandmother and so on. Secondly, because it is clearly something created by someone under 25 – “I wouldn’t think of an object like this one, it is a problem that is only raised in the head of someone under 25”, the issue of communication – the problems with virtual communication, the idea that the direct physical encounter cannot be replaced by a situation of virtual communication. Thirdly, it is something that any company would be interested to fund, for example if he would put it in practice and propose it to the *Salone del Mobile* it would be really interesting, it is the kind of thing that everyone would like, therefore, there is also the institutional advantage, he said. By ‘everyone’ I suppose he refers to people in the ‘creative business’ and the ‘ethos of potential’ in which their business is based (Sennett 2006) – so while my framework was remaining within use-value, having the traditional product-oriented’ configuration of design in mind and its concerns with utility (Crabtree & Rodden 2002), Osvaldo was referring to another kind of value – potential-value – within another kind of framework: *a conceptual* and explorative one that opens novel design possibilities.

Concerned about what the project refers to, I insisted, “well, it is a simulation of a chat, isn’t it?” He said, “yes, it is a simulation of a chat but meant to be used in a bar or in a situation like that. The people using it don’t know with whom are they talking to”. What puzzled me, actually, is that there was a practical use in mind, that is, people – it is indeed meant to be used in a bar – but then, knowing in advance that it never will be used in real situations. And it is not meant for an art gallery either: as Flora explained me, the difference between design and art objects is that design objects are meant to be sold – they are made with the market in mind. But in this case, the use value is just pure potential. “Well”, I said, “if there are existing chats which do that, what’s the reason for reproducing it? Why would I need this version with all its complicated tubes? Isn’t it redundant? And then the tube gets all tangled...”, I joked, as it was hard to imagine that as a serious project. Osvaldo said “yes, but it is a kind of physical chat, a medium for direct communication – with voice, sound, etc. – however virtual – I don’t know the person with whom I am talking to”. “But for that we have other, more simple, mediums”, I insisted: – “we can all be in the same place disguised or something... I still don’t see why would anyone ever need such a complicated device...” My point was that *outside* of the world of design it has no possible life, it has no meaning. My concern was with the reference, the reality, the *practical* use of the object, or how could that ever possibly turn into an innovation if from the practical point of view it does not change anything. I was thus, concerned with the ‘practice’ *outside*. The questions seem to be detached from real people’s lives, and from that point of view, it seemed abstract to me. Through the fieldwork process I was always concerned with the people (users, consumers, the audience, real-time relationships with people in the present). I was puzzled by the fact that the object MyTube is not a commodity – commodities presuppose consumers/users – and at the same time it is not an art object either – which presuppose public. Both situations (commodity/art) would presuppose interacting with ‘people’ somehow – I mean, non-designers. But there is no public in mind, no users in mind, just other designers.

In this context, however, the reference is not the world *outside* design: there is no outside design. Within the system, inside, ‘practice’ means something different to what it means in anthropology. Being empirical does not mean interacting with people (something that is concerned with the present), but making a prototype and make the questions derive from the making – and then, possibly, there will be

specific uses by specific people (in the future, the notion of ‘outside’ is only in the future, it is projected; these possibilities work indeed like the scenery within von Trier’s film). This project was considered good conceptually because the idea emerged from a practical process and not the other way around. Thus, what it means to do something – to research something, to create something, to generate practical effects – is only meaningful within the context of what practice means. The more thorough the process would be (finding better questions), the more interesting (and free in terms of creation) it is considered and referred as “conceptual” from the designers point of view.

Thus, I started to learn that they were not ignoring that they are working with existing and concrete places, however, they use the specificity of places for a different purpose, bringing them in to their inside (self-referential) world. It is in this sense that there is a different understanding of the relationship between specific and general. In this context, the specific refers to the subjective process of discovery one goes through. For example, and back to the session, another student, I will call her Nina, developed an idea for the *Arco della Pace*, in Milan, a place that is located in the intersection of an area of intense traffic from the main park in the city (Parco Sempione). Nina started from Murray Schaffer’s concept of soundscape (1977) (*paesaggio sonoro*) to develop her project<sup>45</sup>.

The idea of soundscape, as I understood from previous education in visual anthropology, means collecting real sounds from a context or environment – the sound is recorded in a given place with minimal interference – although it can be edited afterwards. The idea is to collect, to document the sonic atmosphere of a place, and not to interfere with it. But in Schaffer’s conception in particular and his followers, the sounds from nature had a more positive connotation in comparison to artificial sounds from cities. This usually does not matter to anthropologists doing soundscapes, but this is precisely what matters to Nina: according to her, “the soundscape of the Arco della Pace is not the best” – it is an area with highly congested traffic. So, Nina presents her research model (prototype) in which she tried tubes in different materials – tubes in paper, tubes in wire, tubes in plastic – and she put them in the exterior of the model of the place she chose. These tubes are meant as an installation for “listening to the soundscape of *Arco della Pace*”. She started with

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<sup>45</sup> An article about this project can be found here: <http://www.abitare.it/highlights/hilo-paesaggi-sonori/>

the declaration that “the world of the hi-fi was a better one than the world of low-fi”, that means that the world of hi-fi, where it is possible to distinguish sounds from one another as in the countryside, is a better one than in the noisy modern urban landscape, where one cannot distinguish discrete sounds anymore from the background noise. So her installation was meant to amplify particular sounds in the noisy city, that is, it is meant to selectively isolate the sounds of nature from the park nearby, while reducing the traffic sounds from the noisy background.

When I heard this I wondered how a soundscape can be considered good or bad if a soundscape (in the ethnographic sense) is supposed to be descriptive, showing an actual acoustic environment. In this case, the existing sonic surroundings are not collected (not something descriptive), but they are changed, designed, intervened. She rather takes this concept of soundscape to create something completely different, she wants to highlight different types of sounds of *Arco della Pace* – which means that she uses the idea of soundscape to produce something which is not what a soundscape, in the ethnographic sense, is supposed to be.

Actually, I realized long before that the concept of soundscape had a different use in design than it has in anthropology: once, when receiving the publicity on a new masters program on Digital Environment Design, I noticed that the design concept of soundscape seemed to be different from the one I knew. In that course, it seemed to refer to the creation of an atmosphere – in which sound is something to be designed – instead of collecting existing sounds from an environment – transforming it in a new environment.

Designers are not so interested in approaching the existing ‘reality’ as social scientists do, they prefer to create something new from the start. The ‘existing’ is for them raw material available to be transformed. There is no ‘external reality’ in design: in the sense that the external reality does not count as potentially transformative, it is not considered generative in the same way it is for ethnography. The specificity of places, contexts, social environments, is not there to be understood, it is there to be changed. This is nothing new as it is a common convention in modernist design and architecture. However, the way it is *performed* in these specific situations reveals particular uses of the general versus the specific that are worthy of attention. Soundscape in design means an acoustic atmosphere or environment, something much more active than descriptive. These performativities reveal something that is absent from other accounts of innovation.

Actually, Nina's project is the design of a structure of tubes that allows users to listen to their own soundscapes (both low-fi and high-fi), interfering with those sounds by amplifying some sounds and lowering others. It assumes that the perception of the environmental sound not only can be changed, but it is something constructed in the act of listening. Listening is thus paralleled to the act of consumption within the consumer-driven, post-industrial culture, where the consumer becomes a producer (Dean 2009: 4).

What this design approach to soundscapes reveals is that the listener/consumer/user is not seen as 'an external other' to be interpreted and described, but it is more like a subjective-self to whom prescriptive desires are projected, and this reveals a lot about innovation conceptions: it is this performativity that is largely absent from STS accounts of innovation in the making. It is not surprising that the ethnographic approaches to the user in design processes – see for example Suchman's participatory design and approaches to users describing how people actually behave – are seen as quite exotic and alien to these designers (see the previous chapter), as those approaches are based on a descriptive user, and thus are seen by designers as a conservative position (Suchman 1987; Blomberg *et al*, 1996). Taken together, these approaches – design and ethnographic approaches to soundscapes – expose a dilemma – that some consider the ethnographer's dilemma – between conservatism and innovation. Referring to a debate between Suchman and Winograd, Grudin & Grinter (1995) write about "the ethnographer's deep professional bias against intervention", or what Button & Dourish (1996) call "the paradox of ethnomethodology". Their argument is that revolutionary designs with a large impact are not likely to be the results of methods such as ethnography and participatory design (see also Bogdan 2003: 14-15).

Another way of looking at this debate is through Suchman's demystification of technical innovation, stressing "the ways in which initiatives launched in the name of change are based in traditional cultural frames that work in practice to conserve existing institutional orders" (Suchman & Bishop 2000: 327), which is a way of reversing the debate between conservatism and innovation. One of the issues of STS, she recalls, has been the question of what counts as 'innovation' in science and engineering, revealing the "mundane forms of inventive yet taken for granted labor, hidden in the background, that are necessary to the success of the complex sociotechnical arrangements" (2009: 1). With respect to technology innovation,

Suchman proposes the idea of “artful integration”, “attempting to shift the frame of design practice and its objects from the figure of the heroic designer and associated next new thing, to ongoing, collective practices of sociomaterial configuration, and reconfiguration in use” (2009: 12). Suchman is thus representative of a broad STS tradition. However, precisely what I am interested in is looking at how this notion of the ‘heroic designer’ and hubristic invention that STS approaches leave out are performed. It is that notion that is concerned with the ‘enchantment of innovation’ (Jiménez 2008) or what Sennett (2006) terms the ‘ethos of potency’: the idea that what matters is *what can be* rather than *what is*. All the background work of invention and its mundane practices that Suchman and others refer are done for the sake of this ‘hubristic’ vision that you will never reach anything new if you just limit to what exists. STS approaches use quite a selective notion of practice: what counts as practice, within the STS tradition, is revealing the ‘unpredictable trajectories’ and the mundane, routine tasks beyond ‘invention’ as an abstract concept of creation and construction (Yaneva 2009: 14). However, they do not account for what designers themselves deem to be practice. This leaves invisible the practices that are actually associated with precisely the intents of hubristic creation which keeps design work going. Ethnographers are thus committed to a notion of ‘practice’ as outside, whereas designers emphasize the reverse. I do not aim to resolve this debate, but rather I am using it to expose designers’ performances of innovation as the production of the new.

Nina’s example is paradigmatic of this ‘hubristic’ notion of action. In her project, context is seen as un-transformative, which is something that is paradigmatic of designers’ assumption that change comes from the inside rather than the outside – this is concerned with a conception of creativity as an internal process (a topic that I explore in chapter 4), and thus the myth of the heroic inventor and singular achievements of the new stems from here. Context, rather than seen as relational, in a very modern way is kept as the outside and the division between subject and object is also kept apart – in that sense, this vision of innovation can be interpreted as conservative to a modern tradition. However, this division, this separation and distance from the context, from the existing, is something that is actively pursued as essential for the creative process.

Designers themselves turn to the idea of ‘showing the process’, revealing the mundane practices of invention in a similar way to those accounted by Suchman,

although to their own accomplishments. Nina's project was appreciated also for the 'concreteness' of its communication: Osvaldo appreciated the fact that she communicates her research and compiles her material in a blog – the organization of the information is an aspect that received a lot of praise: the fact that she arranges it in a certain order, for example: "Castle area: Research 1; Research 2", as they said it makes the research visible. They praised the fact that Nina presented her project as a research in process, with actual materials, and with the use of a model. The model, they say, exposes the process of her individual research, not as a product, but as a process where several different ideas are put on to the test. They emphasize this as the distinction between what they consider as being empirical, not abstract. The relationship between the individual creator and the sociomaterial environment is in fact there, and rather than made invisible (or black-boxed), is actually exposed, performed, even amplified in its presentation. But it is a very peculiar kind of relationship: one that externalizes context, making it irrelevant to the creative process.

Another project illustrates this point further: "*Suono, spazio, tempo, uomo*" ("Sound, space, time, man"). The student started by pointing out the references that influenced her work: she mentioned two books, from Rudolf Wittkower and from Junichiro Tanizaki. Artists: James Turrel; Edwin Van der Heide. Then she presented this circular scheme, with time at the center, surrounded by sound, space and "man", intended to show her interest in researching the relationship between "Man" and time, "Man" and sound and "Man" and space – she actually did not explore much about that relationship – but she uses this as a 'conceptual' justification for her project, as she is proposing an experience for spectators of experimental music. She proposes an object in a bell shape called '*estensore*' which when laid on a surface activates the music one wants to hear, with the possibility to choose where we want to hear it. The comments were not very positive – the main problem, according to Osvaldo, was that she inverted the priorities between the specific and the abstract. He said to her "for example, take Dan Flavin<sup>46</sup> – he presents neon lights (in a church of Milan, called Chiesa Rossa<sup>47</sup>) and only afterwards he says "it's God", so the answer to a question comes afterwards, not the other way around" – this was to say that she started wrongly with the possible answers around the research of the relationships

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<sup>46</sup> A famous contemporary artist: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan\\_Flavin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Flavin)

<sup>47</sup> A picture of the space: <http://www.nessundove.net/navate-a-luci-spente/>

between "Man, space, time, sound". Theory about what the work is about should come after the work is carried out. Here we find some parallel with ethnography, as an anthropologist might say the same about ethnography, but the difference is that here it works for the 'inside' of the creative process, which is itself internalized.

Another example was a project that addressed the issue of sleeping disorders. It started by presenting a problem: 30% of people have sleeping disorders. The student ambled through the topic of neurotechnology, followed by a presentation of research on products for helping one fall asleep. According to Osvaldo, the problem is that the student is working on the *effects* of the problem, while it would be a better idea to work on the *causes* of the problem. Again, what went wrong was a specific form of inverting priorities between the general and the specific. Osvaldo usually wants to push students, as well as his co-workers in 'the Studio', to think about *new* questions, rather than presenting solutions for resolving problems (another parallel with ethnography) – through time I learned that this is one of the reasons why they admire and respect him. The conceptuality they speak about has to do with this challenge, with this specific way of being abstract: producing good questions from concrete 'problems' – although 'abstract' and disembodied these problems may be from an ethnographer's point of view. This is what makes the difference, from their point of view, between a good question and a non-question.

In that sense, being conceptual is being able to raise good questions, which is also being empirical. Moreover, being empirical is concerned with the performance of the process – performing it as open, as research in progress – it is not concerned with being descriptive or open to others' concerns as in ethnography. A good process in design is a process whereby one arrives at 'good questions' (a good performance of an open, explorative process, albeit internalized) instead of answers. 'Answers', therefore, refer to the 'giving people what they want' version of innovation (this is being conservative from their point of view), while providing 'questions' is a process concerned with new and unexpected findings during the design process (although self-centered and simulated it may be – see the next chapter on the dramatization of potential).

However, the question is tricky, because following Suchman & Bishop's idea (2000), this is the traditional, conservative aspect of it: that is what artistic creativity and innovation has always been about; this is the modern conception of invention as singularity and individuality of its creator being performed. Thus, though the

‘experience of making’ that STS scholars describe (Yaneva 2009) is somehow performed and exposed by designers when they show their processes, as it is this process that makes ‘innovation’ empirical, this is done for keeping the modern conception of invention based on the individuality and subjectivity of the creator intact – because this is what motivates them to design, it is what generates the possibility of the ‘new’. So it can thus be regarded as a *conservative way* of making innovation in that sense, but that does not resolve the essential question of where the ‘new’ comes from, which here is the ‘native’s’ point of view of the problem.

### **“Showing the process”**

The aforementioned examples also reveal the importance of the visual presentation of *the research process*, an aspect that assumes particular centrality in the academic work of designers. Students are encouraged to pay attention to presentation of their work, the communication should be very clear, so often the comments are concerned with the presentation, although the conceptual framework and assumptions often remain unquestioned.

Every project presented reveals work done purely for communication purposes – making blogs, videos, and prototypes amongst others. This aspect is not specific to the world of the ‘design School’ – it is also present in ‘the Studio’, and it is shared by the more traditionally-academic world of architecture as well. Enrico, a young architect from ‘the Studio’ who was doing tutorials in a public university of Milan, once invited me to one of the sessions where students would be presenting their final projects in architecture on the topic of public space. The majority of these projects were suggesting interventions in existing public spaces in the city of Milan, however, once again I felt that the students were talking about space from an abstract point of view – distanced from people’s uses and experiences.

They pick out real places in the city and then they think of it as neutral physical structures. For example, one student chose Via M. Goia, close to Martesana, which is a place alongside a disused railway line. Showing a map, and pictures of the street, she said she found the space “to be lacking in character”. So she imagines and proposes urban gardens for the area in order to resolve that problem. Looking and

thinking about what this and the other students were proposing, I realized how much they think about places as spaces. They do think about 'use' – but in a general, abstract way. In this example, what the student is looking at, as well as some of the other students when referring to the "use" of the places they choose is: is it a commuting area? Is it drivable? Is it a pedestrian area? Is there a market? It is a passage area? Is it a residential area? Use refers to the characteristics of the space. By 'use' they mean functional characteristics, general use.

The style of the presentations is similar to the presentations in 'the School', although more homogeneous and conventionalized in terms of visualization: they all present structures, maps; sometimes they make use of photomontages. References are other projects (*riferimenti progettuali*), sometimes they are concepts, but which they only mention cumulatively, without explaining the thread they establish with it, or the relationship between what they are doing. References are not used to make an argument, but they are rather used in a visual way, as conceptual pastiche, as if icons, as merely a collection of images. References are effective only in a way images are – they are there to convince by seduction, not by logical argument. They are not linear, neither they are representational.

Through the lecturers' comments I realized that they do not discuss the content of references, so I suppose they assume this is normal, as their focus goes more to the way the projects are presented – if they are effective or not in terms of communication. What they discuss is the presentation of images/maps/graphs/models and what works and does not work in terms of the representation of these visualizations, its communicative capacity. If the project is well communicated, it is a good project, but if it does not communicate well, then it has no value – regardless of the content.

Visualization is so highly conventionalized and technical that the content of the projects – what are they really proposing – was left undiscussed. One of the students was saying that what he was proposing was not a reconversion of an area, but it was creating a "conceptual continuity"; another one discussed "creating a liquid space" – I wondered what that was about. I thought these kind of statements would raise questions, interest, discussion, however, everyone seemed familiar enough with these ideas, and so they raised no comments, no reactions, as if it is just part of the language they use. Actually, one of the lecturers said she did not quite get from one of the presentations (PowerPoint slides) where was the 'liquidity' proposed,

suggesting that she understands it is used more aesthetically (as an aesthetic effect) than substantially – but still, it is to the communicative capacity of the project she is pointing out, not to its actual *practical* intention – what does "liquidity" actually mean in terms of proposal for that context?

This is an aspect that I also noticed in ‘the School’, in the session I described before, where one student designed a space for electronic music (for *Rotonda della Besana*<sup>48</sup>), which she called a space for the white sound (*rumore bianco*), an expression that is used to define electronic music, distinguishing it from erudite music. The student mentioned as a reference “Arca”, a scenography designed by the architect Renzo Piano for the Church of San Lorenzo, in Venice, which re-opened briefly in 1984 as a venue for the Biennale, where he had built a temporary wooden amphitheater inside the church for the debut of an opera by the composer Luigi Nono.<sup>49</sup> Based on the morphological study of the ear, the student developed the idea for an “auricular pavilion”. Osvaldo found it a good idea, since from a practical point of view, she was proposing something which did not exist in Milan – a space for electronic music. However, Osvaldo’s comments were more concerned with the form of the presentation, assessing its effectiveness of communication (suggesting a lot of ways to improve it), rather than its content. The content, again, is beyond question because anything is possible, as long as it is well presented, well communicated – through a good video, prototype or website. No one discusses what the *practical* effects of those changes will be outside communication – because the *practical* effects *within* the presentation is what matters.

Thus, ‘showing the process’ is rather a form of *enactment* of the process in the sense that it substitutes the process: the content and what the project refers to does not seem as important as the presentation. Moreover, I realized that ‘showing the process’ is actually what counts as *empirical* work. So I was interested in how representations of knowledge substitute knowledge about the world: knowledge is not a form of engagement but rather a form of representation and even dramatization – an aspect that I explore further in the next chapters.

After the session I went for a coffee with Hartvig, the Norwegian service designer from ‘the Studio’, who is also a lecturer in ‘the School’ and had also been

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48 *Rotonda della Besana* (18<sup>th</sup> century) is one of the most original buildings in Milan, whose main characteristic is its octagon shape.

49 (cf: [http://www.slowtrav.com/blog/annienc/2007/10/san\\_lorenzo.html](http://www.slowtrav.com/blog/annienc/2007/10/san_lorenzo.html)).

invited to the presentations of Lorenzo's students. I confessed that I often could not figure out the idea and intention of the projects. According to Hartvig, that happens not because they do not have an idea, but simply because they do not highlight it as they should – they are trained to communicate *the process* and demonstrate the analysis that often the aim/idea of the project is left behind, not discussed. I also mentioned that I found the language they use quite self-referential, in a way that makes the reality they talk about highly abstract. Hartvig said he found that comment interesting, because from his point of view, what they had shown is *highly concrete*, in the sense that they have a *method* which they showed – they show very clearly which area they chose to intervene, they mark it on the map, they show images of the problems identified and such. The method refers to the communication process. Being concrete thus refers to the presentation, to the medium (and indeed, 'the medium is the message'<sup>50</sup>): it means that the language is precise and that the communication process follows all the rules. That is, it is concrete from the point of view of the language/representation process they use, I told Hartvig, which is highly conventionalized and therefore understood by those who share the same language, which from my point of view once again just proves the self-referentiality of the process... Also, I found it abstract in the sense that reality as lived/perceived is transformed into reality represented – through the use of maps and graphic images that make those "realities" abstract. A little surprised with these questions, Hartvig told me that "it is quite natural, because it is what they are expected to do", and "design is really about that!" In reference to the experience of places, he said that students went there and lived and felt the places but then they eliminate/erase that aspect because that is not what matters, they have to be precise and *identify a problem* – that is why this experience dimension is absent from their project presentations – not because there has not been, but because it is *not revealed* – this is an aspect that contrasts with conventions at 'the School', where that process is actually exposed, although focused in an individual, interiorized experience. Hartvig goes on to say that they have to follow *a process* and reveal that process – by process he means the communicative design method.

Despite the differences – in 'the School' students are encouraged to be more 'experimental' ('hands-on' as an opposition to theory, explored in Chapter 3) and to

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<sup>50</sup> McLuhan, 1964.

reveal the process of making, and thus in ‘the School’ the process is exposed rather than black-boxed – in both sessions what counts as practice (empirical, dynamic and processual) is definitely not something relational with an ‘outside’ external world of representation. As Yaneva details about the Rem Koolhaas’s office, “Designers never go ‘outside’; there is no outside. Manhattan, Seattle, Cordoba are brought into the office; their life is re-enacted in the studio practice. The studio constitutes their world. There is no one imaginary Reality within the walls of the office (...), and another Reality outside, but one heterogeneous design world that generates meaning” (2009: 85). Just as in a design office, the design world is their world: there is no outside. However, these examples show another meaning associated with the idea that there is no ‘outside’: there is no outside because there is no public/users/other people in mind than designers themselves and their imagination. They work for the sake of the ‘new’ – ‘new’ defined according to the criteria of a system turned into itself. Thus, literally, there is no outside in mind in these projects, only the inside of the imagination and visual simulation of innovation. Innovation, in this view, is not outside language. There is no outside – of language, representation, simulation – in these projects, an aspect that I will explore further in the next chapters.

## **Conclusion: the generative ‘inside’**

This chapter was about conceptuality as a form of practice: it details how ‘concepts’ are performed. Whereas in the ‘practice approach’ concepts and practices are usually separate domains (practice theory arises usually in opposition to intellectualism or representationalism) (Schatzki 2001: 2) or the embodied against mental entities, here I showed how conceptuality is, in fact, enacted. So, the chapter is about *the practice* of concepts. I detail a process where I discovered that conceptuality is not abstract as I thought it was. What I am doing is extending the practice approach to concepts. There is, thus, no possible antagonism between concepts and practices. The ethnography shows that the relationship between the abstract and the specific *is itself specific* in design. With these examples I learned that being conceptual is not remaining in an abstract level, quite the opposite: a good specific conceptual design process, a process that is not merely ‘abstract’, is a

process whereby the designer goes through an experimental process that will enable him/her to generate good questions, rather than presenting answers to problems – and then communicate it effectively. This situation presents a paradoxical dilemma between innovation and conservatism. From the designer's point of view, presenting answers to problems (solving-problem design) is considered not going beyond what already exists, not going beyond 'what users want' (conservatism). Thus, being empirical, from this point of view, does not mean to interact with other people/places, but rather to go through an open and unpredictable process of research-in-the-making within, making prototypes and models and communicating the concreteness of the process (innovation).

So on the one side, there is the idea that in order to innovate, designers should not be limited to what exists. Throughout the examples I showed, students are not encouraged to interact with the places they were proposing to intervene, they rather work with representations, substituting knowledge of the world for representations of knowledge of the world (cf. Suchman 1994: 188-189), and thus dealing with space as an abstract concept, a representation. This is reinforcing (in practice, and performatively) a modern conception of action, but it is this separation that is considered generative of innovation. The idea that innovation is working with new questions beyond the existing works as a sort of legitimation for working with representations only. Thus, despite the 'innovation' purpose that it claims to embrace, design may be seen as conservative to a conception of action and change centered on the individual, subjective creativity and imagination, where what counts as change is the simulation of change. Change is *inside* the medium: communication, representation. Through the examples I showed the way designers work with images of the process, thus revealing that these representational practices are concerned with the imaginary character of change: change as a matter of representation and simulation rather than real change with practical effects.

The examples I described were all exercises in mobilizing the imagination of change, and imagination that is beyond practical (outside representation) effects. What the examples have in common is that content (what the projects refer to in an outside world) is not important, what matters is the imagination, the performative character of change. Change is rather worked out as an illusionary, performative affair, which is a topic that I expand in the next chapter.

For these designers, imagination is always in command: imagination is not just a medium to reality, it is itself a form of reality and reality-making. The paradox, however, is that remaining inside imagination (and representations), if seen from an STS/ANT point of view, may be regarded as just as conservative as the opposite move (the ‘giving people what people want’ sort of version, a purification process between subjectivity and objectivity) – but seen from an ethnographic point of view, it is this conservatism (the distance between ‘reality’ and ‘imagination’) that is considered vital for creation. Conceptuality is, thus, the generative power of the ‘inside’.

## 2. Fiction

### ***15 minutes of culture: conceptual design as dramatization of (potential) change***

In fieldwork, I was often intrigued with the way designers build narratives around objects and use objects as carriers of meaning. Narratives are usually created *around* objects because, as I often heard, being a designer is about producing stories, narratives (that is why they say that 'form-follows-fiction'): objects are the vehicles of those stories. Expanding on the reflection on the ways in which designers prioritize abstract representations over the empirical reality, as discussed in the previous chapter, in this chapter I account an episode where "the object is inserted into the story rather than the story inserted into the object" (Naylor & Ball 2005). I will use this example to account how objects are understood as media of the mind, carriers of conceptuality, material extensions of the 'inside' that I describe in the previous chapter: mediation, in this context, is not recognized as a valid concept.

#### **'Objects are not language': objects as mediators**

The question if language has priority over materiality or if materiality has priority over language is a philosophical reflection that is probably as old as the history of anthropology. After the linguistic turn (from the 1960's to the 1980's), anthropology turned to materiality, thus opening new analytical and methodological possibilities (Miller 1987; 2005, Latour 1991; 1992, Gell 1998, etc.). Objects, since then, have been regarded not for what they signify, but for what they do as *mediators* of social relationships. On the basis of this shift is the assumption that objects are not language. In this regard, Daniel Miller was one of the first to argue that artifacts are explicitly separate from linguistic models. In his view, objects have properties that are not commensurable with linguistic expression: objects cannot be broken up as

though into grammatical subunits, but they have a close relation to emotions and feelings (2005: 107).

Miller is thus particularly critical about what he considers the pervasive influence of linguistic methodology upon the studies of objects since the rise of semiotics in the 1960's, from which any domain started to be treated as a semiotic system: "this extension took place at the expense of subordinating the object qualities of things to their world-like properties". Within the semiotic perspective, objects become nothing more than passive vehicles of meaning, which signify, symbolize, denote, reflect, embody, and so on. Even in phenomenological terms, he argues, objects are considered mainly as "media for addressing the role of agency and the nature of subjectivity" (1987: 87).

The idea that objects are not just media (for language, concepts, ideas) acquired particular centrality within the social studies of science, where attention has been drawn to the technical *mediation* (active role of) of artifacts in invention processes. Mediation does not coincide with functionality, but rather "[...] concerns the ways in which products function as material objects, not the ways they serve as signs. That is not to say, moreover, that products cannot also mediate thanks to their character as potential signs" (Verbeek 2005: 208). But the difference between mediation by signs and mediation by materiality is a considerable one, famous in Latour's comparison between speed bumps and traffic signs, or the bulky object attached to the hotel ring versus placards requesting people to leave the keys at the reception – Latour argues that the speed bump and the bulky key-ring mediate human action materially, while the traffic signs and placards do so as signs (1991; 1992). Drawing on these examples, Peter-Paul Verbeek notes that "material mediation" does not take place on an interpretive level, but on a sensorial level (idem: 209): "The reason people slow down for a speed bump is connected with the concrete physical presence of the bump, which does not simply *stand for* "Slow down!", but physically compels it" (ibid.). Thus, suddenly there is a moment in scholarly literature when a prioritization of objects over words substitutes a previous form of prioritization, which was the prioritization of text and interpretation over the material, sensorial world.

In anthropology, this introduced a change in the way action is understood. Specifically in innovation processes, the turn is to the unpredictable trajectories and the mundane routines (Yaneva 2009), which imply a different philosophy of action

where it is not people alone with their all-too-human intentions that count as action, but rather the ‘mediations’ between people and objects. This ‘new’ notion of action, and therefore practice is, by definition, something that is beyond a division between ideas/language/concepts on one side and objects on the other, thus dissolving the modern dualism between objects and ideas.

The philosophical stance that "objects are not language" is also present in the theoretical design discourse, although with a different concern: it supports the widespread assumption that design requires visual capacities, and consequently, that the realm of materiality is separated and distinguished from the realm of language – which in fact reproduces the modern dualism between objects and ideas, but inverted in favor of materiality. For example, to Naylor & Ball (2005), designers, "[i]deas expressed in words are not design", therefore "[i]n the visual world words are best used like poisons in early medicine, sparingly with caution and restraint. They should be employed as links, titles, puns, adjuncts and bridges; aids, not substitutes" (ibid: 40). Thus, visual literacy is described as *a more embodied* kind of literacy and action is assumed to be before word (ibid: 38), a combination between rational and intuitive capacities. "Words are very important triggers but in the end words are not objects or images and explanations in words are poor substitutes for the real thing" (ibid: 34). ‘Artists and designers’, they defend, ‘are visually-based thinkers and language is often not the most appropriate mode of communication for them’ (ibid). "Words allow us to live in our heads where we can always remain mentally pregnant with ideas; ideas are safe and protected in this delicious speculative womb. Giving birth is a much more painful reality" (ibid: 30). Objects, images and the visual skills that they require are thus separated from words, language and ideas.

However, they stress that because literary and verbal intelligence have been dominant within our culture, in the academic design world "a kind of tyranny of theory is on the rise". This justifies the drive to elevate theory, which in their opinion, stems from a desire to give creative practice ‘intellectual’ credibility (ibid: 38).

"In some parts of the design education world written theory is beginning to dominate academic practice and words are becoming more important than design. There is an increasing sense that ideas are ‘importantly’ expressed only in written form and that a token gesture for the actual design is acceptable: a diagram will suffice. This in turn implies that ideas on their own

and unmediated are sufficient and that it is somehow no longer necessary to translate and test those ideas, to any serious degree, through the medium of an actual three-dimensional form. This suggests that the idea is separate from the object and that the object is a secondary carrier, that the meaning is not integral to the idea" (Naylor & Ball 2005: 37).

Thus, they argue that "[p]ressure to write more and design less means that the narrative around an object becomes more important than the narrative embedded within the object. In this context even when a story is produced visually *the object is inserted into the story rather than the story inserted into the object*" (ibid: 37: my italics). I found this problem in fieldwork through the way 'conceptuality' is used, establishing what seemed to me a hierarchy of the intellectual and abstract over the material and sensorial experience. This problem arises as part of a broader questioning process throughout my fieldwork: it is about the effects, the unpredictable consequences of this particular questioning that the following example is about. By drawing attention to the importance of the performative aspects of innovation into current conceptualizations of the role of materials in innovation processes, my aim is also to draw attention to the embodied ones, namely those that refer to the dialogic relations between the ethnographer and the field, specifically in what regards to the engagements between ethnography and design (Michael 2012a; Crabtree & Rodden 2002; Suchman 2011; Dourish & Bell 2011; Wasson 2002).

## **Nandopessoa**

The idea of working with what's *around* objects was particularly imperious in one of the projects that I was actively involved in at 'the Studio'. It was a creative, 'conceptual' proposal that emerged in response to a competition launched by the Alberto Bonato family foundation. Based in Verona, Alberto Bonato<sup>51</sup> is prominent in the north-Italian tradition of furniture design and production. This is an example of the oligarchical structure of the design industry in Italy, also referred to as the aristocracy of Italian design (Casciani 2008). Until recently, this has remained a key feature of Italian capitalism (Foot 2003: 134): a high concentration of production within a few large, family-run firms, primarily family-based companies located in

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<sup>51</sup> Fictitious name.

north Italy, in the region north of Milan and in Veneto. Every year this foundation organizes an international design competition called "The Significant Furniture" (*Il Mobile Significante*) inviting designers to present 'conceptual' proposals – 'significant' is thus an invitation to work on the level of meaning and signs.

In 2009, the theme of this competition was: "places for relaxing, decorative objects for the domestic space". The call for proposals invited applicants, such as 'the Studio', to invent new domestic objects for relaxing. Because it was a competition, this project cannot be considered a rule. However, this exception was becoming the rule in the midst of the economic crisis: there were less client requests than expected, and thus projects were often self-initiated proposals, rather than the usual client commissions.

This project, as in many others, involved a hierarchical division of work, in which interns, with whom I was collaborating, are assigned the executive work, while project managers monitor the process and make the most important decisions. Lisen was the project manager, while Silvana and Luna were the intern designers assigned to work on the prototype execution and the project booklet. However, somewhere along the way, Osvaldo ended up running the creative process.

I participated in a group brainstorming session: the aim was to imagine an *idea* for an object for relaxing. Osvaldo suggested that we think of alternative uses for a domestic object – a chair or a table for example – and transform it into an object of relaxation. Using the topical economic crisis, which was severely affecting the design industry, Osvaldo intended on framing the object around this idea. It should be more than a functional object: the challenge was to think of an object that would somehow refer to this scenario: ironically, symbolically, with sense of humor. "The Studio' is interested in things that talk about contemporary problems", he said, "so instead of creating a new object, it would be more interesting to reinvent one already in use - an object that should be simple, cheap, specifically adapted to contemporary needs, but it should be clever at the same time". One aspect they usually stress is that "we don't need [to invent] new objects, we need stories for the existing ones". So, the message was to create a story first and then find an object as a vehicle for that story, thus, clearly, the story had priority over the object. In that sense, the story does not emerge spontaneously, it is intentionally, artificially created as part of 'the Studio's' 'interest in contemporary problems' and then we should find the object to fit the

story, rather the story inserted into the object, the reverse of the "good practice" that Naylor & Ball refer to (2005: 37-38).

Framing the story in 'the Studio's' meta-interest in "contemporary problems" is reversing the critical theory-inspired interpretations of design and architecture that Albena Yaneva criticizes for looking at the design processes' 'social influences' and treating design works as spiritual, symbolic, significant (2009: 23)<sup>52</sup> – and thus assuming the 'social' a meta level of interpretation that is separated from the design practice. What the designers of 'the Studio' were trying to produce was something already in symbolic form to be interpreted as such, which is reversing the critical-theory interpretations that Yaneva criticizes – 'the Studio' corresponds with these 'meta-social' expectations in advance. In this performance theory precedes practice in a highly reflexive manner and this process intrigued me. So there is a distinction between the priority that practice approaches, as meta-level of analysis and interpretation, give to practice over theory (Bloor 2001) and the relationships that people establish between these two poles – in this case, how designers *use* them. This latter is what I suggest as being the performativity of practice, an aspect that is absent from STS approaches of design and innovation.

Having this brief in mind – creating a strong narrative about the crisis and then finding the right object to convey it – I joined Silvana and Luna to think about it. We spent nearly a whole afternoon discussing ideas. We started by taking a look at the projects that had won previous competitions, in order to have an idea of what was expected. We realized that in other versions of the competition, the awarded proposals were often seemingly simple objects, with at least one other function, created through a semiotic trick. There were also proposals which Luna and Silvana considered "much too conceptual", that is to say that they had no function at all, notably a project entitled "NoMade" which presented a walking-stick – though the graphic presentation did not clearly illustrate what it is meant for, the intention is to impress on symbolic and intellectual levels rather than on a practical level, and it focuses more on ideas than the object itself – suggested by the play with the words "nomade" and "no-made", maybe suggesting it is a 'ready-made' object.

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<sup>52</sup> Yaneva deconstructs the assumption that the 'social' is a separate domain of reality that can be used as a specific type of causality to account for the 'architectural' aspects: the assumption made by critics that architecture mirrors higher levels of structural complexity, such as 'society' or 'culture'. In contrast with these approaches, she places architecture practices from the inside, in a realm of their own (ibid: 18-23).

The next step was collecting “references” to send to project coordinators. References are given extreme importance. In this context, collecting references means researching the existing solutions to a problem or looking at what other designers or artists did or are doing about the same topic or situation. The references are part of the “conceptual” starting point, and then are presented not only to supervisors, but to be later included in the "conceptual" project booklet.

The references that Luna and Silvana chose as inspiration, which they then sent to everyone involved in the project were: the idea of human furniture, suggested in a blog called Homatography<sup>53</sup>, and an idea of an object for doing exercise at home, similar to a static bicycle but far more simple<sup>54</sup>, presented in a website on the subject. The link between these references and the ideas that we presented further, however, is not expressed; the relationship is rather a tacit one. This is because references are collected and presented as an accumulation; there is no literal description or discussion of its concept. In ‘the Studio’, every design project starts with an Internet search for these references, usually presented through an iconic form, not a descriptive one – this is one aspect where ‘visual literacy’ remains ‘visual literacy’ (Naylor & Ball 2005: 38).

Based on these references, we tried to think about ordinary objects, such as a table, a chair, a sofa or a bathtub, and on how to convert their function such as for resting. We ended up choosing a table as an object, because a table has very important symbolic connotations in Italian life – a table is able to symbolize the importance of family, of gregarious life and conviviality, and thus it was also an easier point to trigger thought about the cultural transformations associated for example with family rituals – or lack thereof, or how those are affected by the crisis and its contemporary predicaments. Lisen agreed with the idea, and so we returned to brainstorming to concentrate on the brief: we wanted to combine the idea of the table with the idea of an object for relaxing, and this object should also be low-cost and affordable: all in one. How to make that synthesis?

We wanted to create a table, which could be not only used for eating or working, but had more than one function (of relaxing). By this point, I began to question the fact that ‘the object’ was a general category rather than a concrete one: to me, paradoxically, alternative functions could always be found for any table – and

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<sup>53</sup> <http://homotography.blogspot.com/2009/04/human-furniture-by-david-blazquez.html>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.campeggisrl.it/coppi.html>

indeed with any object. Any object can potentially be used to serve a purpose other than that it was designed for... So I found it hard to understand why the need to invent a table specifically for alternative functions, because what defines the concept of table is precisely its function. If we invent an object with the same shape as a table but say it is for something else, then, it does not need to be called a table, it is something else...

Then, specifically concerned with the question that I explained above – the question of language/materiality and abstract/ empirical or which priority do they give to each one – I asked Silvana and Luna during our brainstorming session if they usually depart from something specific and concrete or from a general concept. “General, of course”, replied Silvana. But I suggested: “why wouldn’t we try to look at a table, a concrete material three-dimensional table, and try to explore its (material) possibilities?” Obviously what matters is the general object, as in this case, not any specific table – said Silvana, explaining that we were not interested in any concrete table as “each table can be different”; and we were not interested in “behavior” either because, “of course, each one can do whatever one wants with a table”, but that’s not what we were interested in - what we wanted to do was work with *the concept* of ‘table’. “But couldn't it be a way of thinking about what else a table can do”, I insisted. “Wouldn’t that potentially open possibilities for more ideas? Or we could observe what people usually do with tables?” Curiously, these questions – not only here in this conversation as well as in many conversations I had in similar situations – were interpreted as if I was straightforwardly concerned with technical (and boring) functionality, or too concerned with the ‘existing’.

My suggestion, though, was not to make a study on how people use tables neither to observe what people really do in the sense of documenting it, but in the sense of getting inspiration from it. However, that that was not the aim here – and it is not how they see inspiration more broadly. The usual argument is that they want to create an idea that is ‘new’, and for that reason the ‘existing’ is not important; what counts as ‘inspiration’ is other ideas that are considered as ‘new’. The idea that creativity in design occurs at the moment of representation is so taken for granted that it is almost common sense in design and architecture<sup>55</sup>. Inspiration does not

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<sup>55</sup> “(...) (T)he products of architecture are not just buildings, but also drawings and models, and writings, each of them a mode of representation of reality with which architecture is engaged, each of them with some similar concerns, but each somehow keeping a certain degree of independence and autonomy from the other. (...)

come from daily life/use, but from other designers, artists, architects or any other sort of intellectual visionaries. Inspiration sources are other ideas – representations about the world rather than the world. Thus, designers produce ‘models’ of reality that are based on other ‘models’ of reality all the way through – which means that in the end, there is no reality but only ‘model’ quotations – which is actually the role of ‘references’ in their work.

However, I later learned that the reason they depart from ‘general concepts’ is quite conventional. Working on the ‘conceptual level’ means working on abstract ideas of things (archetypes), instead of concrete things in specific situations. What we wanted to work was with objects as abstract categories – not *any* table, but “a table”, or “what a table is in the social linguistic imaginary”. In design, this is called “the reinterpretation of the archetype”, and it is a common strategy in conceptual design (Ferreira 2010). Among the strategies of formal concretization that are more often used in conceptual design (such as paradox, or metaphor) there is the reinterpretation of the archetype, which refers to the abstract typologies of objects. This is the idea that some typological forms are more mature than others in the collective imagination, so some designers choose to work on those typologies, recycling them, reconstructing them in a new context or in a new association. So within a conceptual design framework, designers do not transform objects, they transform its meaningful archetype – which again, points to the performance of a primacy of ideas and how this primacy is considered important and generative for the creative process. Also, the recontextualizing of objects and the use of readymade, once widely used by Dadaists and conceptual artists, is now a resource in conceptual design: an existing typology of object is given new functions, the appropriation of the familiar, the existing, into new uses, new functions, inserted into new stories (ibid). In this sense, much of what Osvaldo and Lisen in ‘the Studio’ claimed – that design is not about form or materiality, but it is rather about fiction; or that we don’t need new objects, we need stories for existing ones (as I describe in the introduction to ‘The Studio’) – is already part of a broader conceptual design discourse. For example, the idea that postmodern design is redesign – the awareness that it is not

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(A)rchitects do not build buildings. Architects draw. That is all we do, and we return thus to the issue of substance and materiality of practice, which defines the practice itself; the task of the architect, as designer and conceiver of a building, ends when the drawing is finished. The implication of this simple fact being that creativity in architecture occurs only at the moment of representation, that moment full of partialities, delirium, and concealments – that artistic moment.” (Jorge Silvetti 1982, in Hays, 1995: 114-115).

possible to invent anything new anymore (in terms of form). In conceptual design, form is given less importance than meaning. For example, the designer Jasper Morrison in his essay *The unimportance of form* (1991), argues that "describing the designer as a form-giver is inaccurate". The 'intellectualization' turn that Naylor & Ball (2005) point out that turn objects into carriers of words is certainly due to this theoretical trend.

In our process of exchanging ideas, we collected a list of suggestions that Luna and Silvana drew in a paper. We communicated those suggestions with the project supervisors – Lisen, Osvaldo and Alessandro – sending them our sketch: this was our 'creative' contribution.

## **Luna**

hello to all,

we are currently working with Lisen, Silvana and Andrea on an object for resting, and this chosen object has been taken from the domestic environment (table) which can be used not only for writing or eating, but also for relaxing and unwinding from work. The object would be low-cost, in order to adapt to the current economic crisis and at the same time follow a general discourse about a series of projects that are underway at 'the studio'.

the spirit of the project aims to be propositive (we try to design a low-cost object which would have a double functionality, but that would also keep an element of irony and fun).

some hypotheses:

table tapis-roulant for the model who wants to digest her sushi.....!!!!

table-golf for the business man in crisis

table with airbag for the drunk whose head dangles

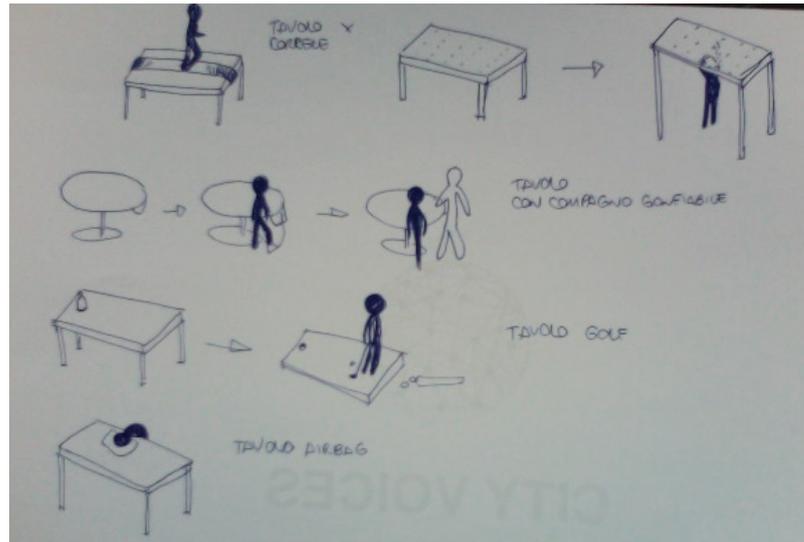
table with inflatable friend for the depressed singleton, which is low budget because shopping is still just for one

table deckchair for the brawny

(e-mail<sup>56</sup>, my translation from Italian)

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<sup>56</sup> Here I reproduce e-mails not only in terms of content (text and images) but also maintaining the layout and the formatting style.



**Figure 10:** The sketch of our ideas as drawn by Luna while we were brainstorming: the image was included in the previous e-mail.

All of these ideas were two-in-one, or “tables with something else”, so we just added something to the existing concept of what a table is, without making any changes to the object: in that sense, we worked with stories *around* the object. Also, these objects-categories were thought with user-categories (stereotypes) in mind, they were not inspired by real people (thus, ideas are based on other ideas: ideas are based on representations of the world rather than the world – again, the performance of a priority given to ‘theory’).

Picking up our ideas, Osvaldo decided to expand them further: he suggested that we should work about the idea of tablecloth instead of a table. Inspired by the Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* – a reference that is used in this context very often (see the previous chapter) – he added these ideas:

**Osvaldo:**

ok  
great.

let's take a table.  
any table.

we are projecting new functionalities  
that make it useful and desirable for people that live this special moment.

all these functions  
refer to situations/persons

typical of this condition.

among those:

- businessman who have lost his job
- head of the family who doesn't have any money left to buy food for the children
- etc. etc.

at this point,  
it occurs to me  
that we should work with a table cloth....

(e-mail, my translation from Italian)



**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**

**Figures 11 – 12:** images 'googled' by Osvaldo and inserted into the text of his e-mail.



over body, contingent actions. However, there is actually a tension between those two poles.

Oswaldo, continuing his e-mail:



**Figure 14:** image 'googled' by Oswaldo and inserted in his e-mail.



**Figure 15:** image 'googled' by Oswaldo and inserted in his e-mail.

a table cloth,  
where to put the specific objects  
though at the end  
you don't have anything to eat  
but at least you have a piece of giorgio morandi.



**Figure 16:** Still life of Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964)<sup>57</sup>. Image 'googled' by Osvaldo and inserted in the text of his e-mail.

reference:

four table cloths.

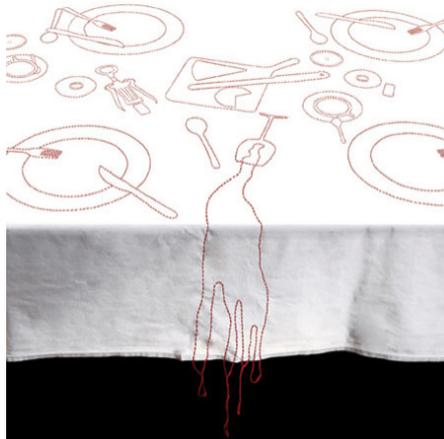
one for positioning golf paraphernalia

one for positioning apparatus for producing music from glasses and bottles

one for positioning the items for making a piece of giorgio morandi

one for positioning the material for making a language course

etc.



**Figure 17:** image 'googled' by Osvaldo and inserted in his e-mail.



**Figure 18:** image 'googled' by Osvaldo and inserted in his e-mail.

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<sup>57</sup> Morandi was a painter who had a profound influence on succeeding generations of Italian graphic artists (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/391850/Giorgio-Morandi>).



**Figure 19**



**Figure 20**

**Figures 19-20:** images ‘googled’ by Osvaldo and inserted in his e-mail. These in particular were taken from Droog Design’s website, who were the introducers of a market for conceptual design products.



**Figure 21:** image ‘googled’ by Osvaldo and inserted in his e-mail.

[...]

another table cloth  
could be dedicated to the garden.

put the plates on,  
the glasses,  
and then, instead of eating  
put on the soil and start cultivating flowers or stuff to eat

After our enthusiastic reception to his ideas Osvaldo continues summing up

his plan. At this point, he had taken charge of the planning and creative decisions, despite Lisen's initial responsibility for this project, but these divisions are often quite flexible.

at the end I would say:

a set of tablecloths embroidered (and/or cut) thematically.

at the moment, six come to mind:

- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put dishes to generate a golf course
- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put glasses and bottles to create a musical instrument
- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put pieces to create a three-dimensional painting of giorgio morandi
- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put the pieces to generate an English course (with text)
- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put pieces to create an internal garden
- a tablecloth with embroidery/holes which indicate where to put pieces to generate a cultivation at home

[...]

if we proceed in this direction, it becomes of extreme importance to find someone who is expert in textiles, fashion, and embroidery, etc.

Everyone liked the idea of *a table that changes its meaning according to the tablecloth it wears*. The next step was to make a prototype that would work as an example of what we were trying out – according to Lisen and Luna, trying to put just one of these ideas onto a tablecloth would be enough, as the other examples could be mentioned in the booklet.

We first tried to make the musical-glasses tablecloth. We started off by choosing a cloth in order to print or embroider at least one of them, which we would then photograph, using the images for a booklet. The idea was to develop a tablecloth with instructions for playing music. The tablecloth should have representations of glasses, indicating the respective amount of liquid that should be in the glass in order to play a tune, but first we needed to try if it was actually possible to play music. Silvana was quite busy at University (she was finishing her degree), so Luna and I took on the experiment. We found a range of glasses around 'the Studio' and filled them with water, the problem was getting the quantity of water right to get the water glasses in tune, this was especially difficult as they were all of different density, size and shape. Although it would have been easier to tune the glasses if they had been identical, Luna preferred the random selection as it alludes to a life of sadness and desperation, a message we wanted to get across. Luna said that she does not have a

musical ear so I gave it a try and managed to get something roughly in tune. And so it was possible to play some simple melodies, and in the process I became quite an amusing performer.

We had yet to reach a decision on the form and aesthetic of the tablecloth. There were suggestions to imprint quotes related to music on the surface. I then searched for some but Luna suggested “Is the glass half empty or half full?”, and we decided to go with that idea. Next, Luna prepared the layout – she made several drafts with different versions regarding the visual instructions on where to put the glasses. After several drafts, and much decision making, Luna printed the tablecloth – a large, white, cotton cloth, with printed lettering that she designed and later applied at home, with a domestic iron. She did so while a friend embroidered the red lines for the glasses, the lines to indicate how much water should be poured into each vessel. Everyone was happy with the result – very simple, sober and beautiful. So we had at least one prototype done. But the project did not end there, as the prototype was not going to be presented, but rather a conceptual booklet would illustrate the idea. So the next step was to make the booklet, mentioning the overall idea for the set of tablecloths (the story).

We created a scenario and conduct a photo shoot of this situation. Once again, it was Osvaldo’s idea: the object, according to him, should tell a story – the music was just a detail. Quite dramatically, he imagined someone sitting at a table with nothing to eat: a lonely business man, sad, because he lost his job and his girlfriend and also does not have any money left to eat, so he distracts himself by playing music with items on the table. I started to realize that the physical prototype, quite instrumentally, was going to be a mere vehicle for the story. Curiosity got the better of me and I asked Osvaldo why was the character a man, to which he replied: “it is because the story ‘is not general’, he said – it is Romolo”. Romolo is an engineer in ‘the Studio’ with whom he collaborates. He said Romolo inspired him because: “if the story has a character it is easier to identify with it, and so it has a stronger impact. If the story is general, then we won't identify”. But it was general anyway, because it was referring to a "general" stereotype – a lonely business man could be any lonely business man within the category, so fitting Romolo in it, giving it a body, would not necessarily make it specific, I argued. We had had discussions about the general/specific before.

And then he added more details to the story and acting instructions – but all stereotypical details. So, it should be Romolo, “acting as a loser, but dressed in his usual way”, Osvaldo detailed (the amusing detail here is that Romolo, in contrast with Osvaldo who always looks very shabby, is someone who actually dresses quite smart, or smart-casual to be more precise, and Osvaldo often teases him about that). “People would feel a lot of sympathy and emotion for this poor guy: he lost his job, he lost his girlfriend, he has no friends, nothing. Still, [he] is dressed in decent clothes, he tries to shape up, and finally finding himself using the table not to eat but to play music with glasses is a great vision”.

## **Performing the story**

Convinced by Lisen, Romolo accepted the request to play the character and then there we were, on a Friday night, conducting a photo-shoot at Lisen’s flat – Lisen was living in a nice apartment so she invited us all to have dinner there after the session. The session involved a lot of improvisation. First of all, characterization. We searched Lisen’s house for pajamas and some other props for Romolo’s costume. He had to have a depressing image. We set up the table with the new tablecloth for playing with the glasses and took some pictures, with Romolo playing his character. After a break for dinner, we also made an impromptu tablecloth for playing golf using a white sheet and whatever objects we had close to hand, we then took more pictures. Luna and Alessandro were taking photographs while Osvaldo directed the scene.

Back at ‘the Studio’ on Monday, we gathered to look through all the photos we took; Luna chose the best images and retouched them slightly. Then she worked on the graphic sketch of the booklet. She sent some proofs for us to comment on. While looking through the proofs, I realized that the end product of the whole process was a story, through text and images. The tablecloth was informative, and the whole project was ironic, symbolic, and provocative – so it consisted of ‘words’ (the images and objects are just instrumental to the story). Looking at a previous email conversation with Osvaldo about one of his texts: ‘design as fiction’, some new questions came into my mind. One part of this questioning was concerned with

transforming objects into meaning, as if objects could be words. Thus, I wondered why objects were needed and if a text would suffice. A second part of my questioning was concerned with the superfluousness and practical uselessness of such a proposal and its contradiction with the idea of crisis.

**Andrea:**

Ciao Osvaldo,

[...]

I was looking at the proof of the tablecloth sent by Luna [...]

You remember when I was reading one of your texts and I wrote you an e-mail asking something like ... if design is about creating stories, fictions, meanings, rather than objects, then, what difference do objects make, do you really need them? And you said "yes, of course, always". Well, this is the point I wanted to make: this tablecloth is a sign, a word, it has meaning, it is not an object anymore. You don't need it materially to do the things you want to do with it: you can do it with any tablecloth, or even without them - it's an idea, it's immaterial, it is abstract. You can even substitute it for a text. Because the instructions are literal, they are not substituted by the object, the object here doesn't add anything to the information/instructions. The object here (cloth) is just a vehicle of meaning - passive. [...]. Moreover, if we are in crisis, why would we need "meaningful" tablecloths? Isn't it contradictory?

I was hesitant because what I was finding here was the opposite of what Naylor & Ball (2005) say about the primacy of objects over words/ideas. However, that was a form of pre-assumed prioritization that I ended up abandoning through the process in order to understand what kinds of prioritizations were being deployed.

**Osvaldo:**

well,

it is an ambiguous thing.

because in one sense is not an object, but rather a conceptual mask for the table.

but,

at the same time,

it is a true object: a tablecloth.

like a mask.

a mask is a conceptual device.

still,

it is an object...

*You don't need it materially to do the things you want to do with it: you can do it with any tablecloth, or even without them - it's an idea, it's immaterial, it is abstract.*

yes.

we could have done the same thing,

without tablecloth.

still,

we needed the object (the tablecloth) otherwise it wouldn't exist.

you can tell me a very nice story for a movie,

but if you want the movie

you need the film.

here is the same,  
we tell a story  
but we need the "film".  
only in our case,  
the film is an object.

*You can even substitute it for a text.*

no.  
you cannot.  
if you substitute with a text,  
it is not design anymore.  
it is something else

(if you write down your story for a movie, it is not a movie, it is a novel)

*Because the instructions are literal, they are not substituted by the object, the object here doesn't add anything to the information/instructions.*

the object (like the film or the paper for a book)  
is the medium,  
is the thing that make [sic] our idea alive.

*The object here (cloth) is just a vehicle of meaning - passive. (...).*

yes,  
exactly.  
the object is a medium.

you have stories  
you have objects  
and then you have objects carrier (sic) of stories.  
these last things,  
I call them design.

*Moreover, if we are in a crisis, why would we need "meaningful" table-cloths? Isn't it contradictory?*

not at all.  
especially because we are in a crisis,  
stories, movies, love affairs, football games  
become incredibly important to us.

The fact that the object-tablecloth was used and conceived as the medium for a playful and provocative story did not make sense to me because I presumed that the tablecloths were meant to be produced and commercialized at the end of the process, even though they were 'conceptual' objects. I thought that was the point of the project. Another reason for my skepticism with this project was because it presented words/stories/meanings before objects, but the object itself does not speak visually: it is not able to stand by itself without the text – the booklet. The prototype we made

means nothing without the story that was produced *around it* and that accompanies it through the form of the conceptual book – which in turn also presented photographs that would mean nothing without the accompanying text, they do not stand alone. Thus, even if one is prompted to argue that the visual is the booklet instead of the object, it is wrong, as in the booklet itself, words are before images. Thus, my concerns were basically those that Naylor & Ball (2005) express. I wondered about the judges' expectations. Would they be the kind of designers that (like Naylor & Ball 2005) think that "(i)deas expressed in words are not design"? So I asked Osvaldo if the judges were expecting objects-as-media for stories in such an explicit way.

### **Osvaldo**

well,  
you keep forgetting I am a designer with a very practical mind.  
the judges are not an abstract entity.  
they are real people,  
with names, lives, stories.

i know the judges,  
i know what they like, what they don't like.

also,  
they like the way I/we do things (otherwise they would have invited someone else...)

if the organizers wanted real products,  
they would have not invited us.  
if they invited us...

Not only had I ignored that they had been invited, as I naively continued to assume that the object we developed conceptually was intended for production somehow, or that it would at least have a life outside its 'conceptual life', and thus I wondered about the role of such a 'superfluous' idea in a time of crisis.

### **Andrea**

But in regard to objects, why do I need new (design) objects for that, if I can use my own, or if I can recycle existing ones? This is what we already do in our daily lives, in the way we create relationships with them: we, common people, are also very creative. Do you see my point? If the object is just a medium - then, any item will do - not what you are designing because I would need to buy them! If I can use any of my table cloths to play music or golf, why would I need yours?

The possibility to carry out any of these activities is not specifically created by that specific cloth - you already know it's possible to play music with glasses, and so forth, and you don't even need a cloth for that. On the other side, if it is the story that you want to highlight, then, there's plenty of real stories about lonely/depressed/downtrodden people using objects in several unexpected ways, and that can tell more about the predicament of contemporary life, we don't even have to invent new ones.

## Oswaldo

*Regarding objects, why do I need new (design) objects for that, if I can use my own, or if I can recycle existing ones?*

no.  
you cannot.

the emperor is naked  
but everyone is forced to think he has new clothes.  
then, a child says: but these are not new clothes, he is naked.

until the child makes this comment,  
the reality is perceived different [sic].

*This is what we already do in our daily lives, in the way we create relationships with them: we, common people, are also very creative.*

a boy and a girl who argue and split [up],  
[that] is everyday life.

to transform everyday life into romeo and juliet  
is something different.

my cousin is very jealous.  
so what?  
are you interested in my cousin being very jealous?  
i don't think so.

then,  
if you have shakespeare,  
this same (boring) thing, becomes othello.

Oswaldo is not interested in daily life stories – as these are considered *outside* of creativity. What matters to him, for a creative purpose, is *transforming* the specific into general. Daily life (outside) is only potentially creative until it becomes *transformed* (inside, internally) by a subjective creative mind and therefore authorized process – this is what counts as creativity, an idea I explore ethnographically in more detail in chapter 4.

Overall, my questioning was concerned with the possibility of that idea becoming a commodity in the ‘real world’ of ‘real people’ in the ‘real economy’, where ‘design as fiction’ did not seem to have any practical value. I wondered who would need a tablecloth that changes the use of the table? It seemed paradoxical to me to stress design as fiction in a time of economic crisis. In general, however, practical utility was out of the question – the reason I heard was that “you can

[produce commodities] but you don't get a reward for that". In this case, Osvaldo did not have the market framework in mind, nor use – because, indeed, as I later learned, there was no market at stake. Thus, the way he insists on the metaphor of football is quite relevant as it dissolves any previously assumed dualism between 'real economy' and 'imagination', practical objects and symbolic ones.

*Do you see my point? If the object is just a medium - then, any will do - not the ones you are designing because I would need to buy them! If I can use any of my tablecloths to play music or golf, why would I need yours?*

### **Osvaldo**

because if you do it on your own,  
it is not fun.

you need some kind of magician (the writer, the movie-maker, the designer...)  
who transform reality into something different.

if we like football,  
we get a ball and we can play.

why do we need to spend a lot of money to see other people playing?  
because some magicians convinced us that this other way is much more fun.  
and we believe it.  
and we like it.

The question of the priority of meaning over the material in this case is concerned with a priority of imagination over reality: that is, simulation and play, which in turn is concerned with the post-industrial importance of the sphere of consumption, where "utility and functionality are increasingly dispensed with. Appeal is no longer to practical rationality, as a Watsonian (or Freudian) conception of an irrationalist human nature is assumed" (Lash & Urry 1987: 290). Thus, overall, I had to abandon a practical and realist conception of change and innovation, where this and other examples (such as those in the previous chapter) do not fit. The realist conception of innovation that I had to abandon was, in this regard, also theoretical: STS and ANT accounts are both anchored in strong notions of *reality* – and therefore a priority of the material over the ideal/conceptual (for example, Latour 1993; Yaneva 2008; 2009). Play relates to the unexpected, to the possibility of the new – as in fact, Osvaldo used to say, in regard to innovation: "if we would only give people what they want/need, we would still live in caves" (an idea that is ubiquitously explored in this thesis) – but play is also concerned with imagination and the

simulation of change, or with the performance and dramatization of that potential: an aspect that is largely absent from STS/ANT.

However, if Osvaldo does so rhetorically – effectively dissolving my pre-assumed dualism between ‘real economy’ and ‘virtual/imagination/immaterial one’ – he does not do so in practice as we can see from the way the project develops. This is the paradox.

## **Play and the dramatization of potential (change)**

The idea of magic that Osvaldo suggests in his analogy between design and football is reminiscent of Gell's technology of enchantment (1988), where he suggests that magic derives from play. "When children play, they provide a continuous stream of commentary on their own behaviour" (idem: 8). To Gell, imaginative play provides "raw materials for subsequent exercises in innovation and recombination, using previously accumulated materials in new configurations" (ibid.). Play is magic-making in the sense that it goes beyond the frontiers of the merely real: "When a child asserts that he is an aeroplane (...) the commentary inserts the ideal in the real, as something which can be evoked, but not realized. But the unrealizable transformation of the child into aeroplane, while never actually confused with reality, does nonetheless set the ultimate goal towards which play can be oriented, and in the light of which it is intelligible and meaningful". One specific feature that play and technology share, according to Gell, is that "(t)echnology develops through a process of innovation, usually one which involves the recombination and re-deployment of a set of existing elements or procedures towards the attainment of new objectives" (ibid.: 8). Gell was concerned with the process of innovation, which he described as an unpredictable one:

"Innovation in technology does not usually arise as the result of the application of systematic thought to the task of supplying some obvious technical 'need', since there is no reason for members of any societies to feel 'needs' in addition to the ones they already know how to fulfill. Technology, however, does change, and with changes in technology, new needs come into existence. The source of this mutability, and the tendency towards ever-increasing elaboration in technology must, I think, be attributed, not to material necessity, but to the cognitive role of 'magical' ideas in providing the orienting framework within which technical activity takes place. Technical innovations occur, not as the result of attempts to supply wants, but in the

course of attempts to realize technical feats heretofore considered 'magical' " (idem: 8).

The role of play, magic, or the 'enchantment of indeterminacy' is an aspect that is usually absent from accounts of innovation processes, namely those within the STS tradition. But while Gell established a parallelism between technology and play to highlight the indeterminacy of the innovation process, to Osvaldo there is no distinction: what he highlights with the tablecloth example is how change is a matter of imagination. Innovation, in this regard, is not so much concerned with material and technical change (change with real and practical effects as described by ANT and STS scholars) as it is to imagination and play - what matters is producing the illusion of change: drawing on one of Osvaldo's metaphors, it does not matter if the emperor is naked, what matters is the illusion of his new clothes - what matters is changing the signs, instead of the real.

The emphasis on the shifting superficial meanings that an object can acquire without compromising its physical properties (the idea that the tablecloth, as a mask, can transform the 'identity' of a table that is still the same physical table) is the very basic premise of contemporary branding and the notion that the product is the image, rather than its physical properties. In the transition from a production-driven economy (Fordism) to a consumer-driven one (post-Fordism), the illusory process of "(i)magining difference becomes all-important in producing profits" (Sennett 2006: 146).

"When Henry Ford declared that the customer could have any Model T car he or she liked so long as it was black, his son Edsel Ford riposted that colors make profits. What changed now is the participation of the consumer in the process of magnifying differences. (...) The consumer seeks the stimulation of difference from goods which are increasingly homogenized. He or she resembles a tourist who travels from one clone city to the next, visiting the same shops, buying the same products in each. But he or she has traveled: for the consumer, stimulation lies in the very process of moving on. The sociologist Guy Debord thought this is what a consumer does *to* things - changing one's desire becomes, like traveling, a kind of spectacle; it doesn't matter that the things one buys remain the same so long as one can sense oneself shifting (Sennett 2006: 148).

In the dramatization that I describe, the table remains the same, what changes is the meaning of the table through the tablecloth it wears: that is an illusionary

change, which itself simulates the way branding works. It simulates what gold-plating and branding do to things:

“(…) branding seeks to make a basic product sold globally seem distinctive, seeks to obscure homogeneity. (...) Today, manufacturing deploys on a global scale the “platform construction” of goods from automobiles to computers to clothes. The platform consists of a basic object on which minor, surface changes are imposed in order to convert the product into a particular brand. The production process is not quite the familiar industrial one of mass-produced goods. Modern technologies can quickly transform the shape and size of bottles or boxes; the contents can also be redecorated more quickly in electronic production than on the old-fashioned assembly line, in which tools were made fit for a single purpose.

Manufacturers call these changes built on the modern platform gold-plating, and that image is exact. To sell a basically standardized thing, the seller will magnify the value of minor differences quickly and easily engineered, so that the surface is what counts. The brand must seem to the consumer more than the thing itself. (...) The problem for the platform manufacturer is how to make differentiation profitable” (Sennett 2006: 143-144).

Imagining difference thus, Sennett argues, becomes all-important in producing profits (ibid: 146). The differences that the tablecloth introduce to the table can therefore be compared to gold-plating, in a universe where change is just a matter of illusion, and “the challenge of all branding is to create variations of that illusory theme by decontextualizing” (ibid: 147). This is what Sennett calls the dramatization of potential, ‘the enervating role that illusion plays in modern society’ (ibid: 161), that is all concerned with the branding of future possibilities, the impatience with existing reality, the emphasis on what might be rather than what is, which is the opposite of utility and practicality, as I was concerned with. Branding is thus ‘the subtle way through investing things to buy with potency and potential’ (ibid: 142) – the idea that potency is something we can buy. Quoting Sennett,

“(a) commonplace in the electronics industry is that ordinary consumers buy equipment whose capabilities they will never use: memory hard-drives which can store four hundred books, though most people will store at best a few hundred pages of letters, or software programs which sit unopened on the computer. The behavior of these punters parallels that of the buyers of super-fast sports cars who mostly crawl in bumper-to-bumper traffic, or of the owners of the infamous SUV machines meant for desert navigation used mostly to shepherd children to and from school. These are all consumers of potency” (Sennett 2006: 151).

Working with ‘potency’ is also a crucial part of the experimental spirit of cutting-edge firms such as Media Lab and Xerox Park, which as Sennett accounts, are “premised on the idea that puritan utility cramps the spirit of innovation” (ibid.: 157) and the invitation to fantasize. “Put abstractly: desire becomes mobilized when potency is divorced from practice; put simply: you don’t limit what you want to what you can do” (Sennett 2006: 154).

The emphasis on the shifting meanings of the table is also a metaphor for what Baudrillard analyzes as the fundamental difference between the transition from ‘industrial capitalism’ to ‘consumer capitalism’. While in ‘industrial capitalism’ domination was effected through the referent – that is, reality, use-value, commodities, objects with utility – in ‘post-industrial capitalism’ domination is rather through the exchange of exchange-values.

“What is then most important for Baudrillard about contemporary *consumer* capitalism is that we consume, no longer products, but signs (...). It is the image, then, in contemporary capitalism, that is consumed, the image in which we have libidinal investment. The exchange-value of commodities thus has been transformed into a ‘sign-value’. Signs – which comprise both signifier – ‘float free from the referent’ or product, and domination and the ‘social bond’ are no longer through the referent but the sign. (...) Domination through the sign or at least through discourse would characterize not just consumption but the sphere of production in today’s service and information based economies (...)” (Lash & Urry 1987: 288 - 289).

Nevertheless, there are commodities involved in the processes that Sennett and Baudrillard describe: their argument is that when we buy a product we are buying an image, a sign rather than a material thing – the commodity may not be reduced to the material thing, but still there is a commodity where its sign value is implicit. In the process that I am describing, however, there are no commodities: what we are left with is the world of signs (objects as signs) and the *dramatization* of potential that Sennett discusses acquires a literal meaning. So objects are in fact present and tangible, but the focus is on the dramatization *around* them.

### **Consumers becoming producers and ‘idiotic’ encounters**

One idea that is performed through this particular imaginary story is the idea of a consumer becoming a producer – in this case, we have a tablecloth, which can be used to produce an activity (such as golf, gardening or art). This can be

interpreted as a post-structuralist idea, but more than that, it is one of the essential features of post-modern consumer culture. The transgression of boundaries between consumption and production is a characteristic of post-modernism. The contradiction is that although Osvaldo makes the dramatization centered on this transgression, he however explicitly refuses another important characteristic, which is the postmodern 'refuse of the distinction between art and life, between the cultural and the real' (Lash & Urry 1987: 287). With his example and argument: "a boy and a girl who argue and split up is part of everyday life and transforming everyday life into Romeo and Juliet is something different", he sets up a very clear distinction between art and everyday life, between the image/representation (design) and the real. When I questioned him about the role and authority of the designer as an author – why was it important to have a designer, rather than use our own imaginations, to conjure up alternative uses for a table – he reaffirms the distinction between production and use, the creative author/designer and the receiver/user/consumer/audience: because a 'magician' is required, he argued, one who can transform everyday life into art, otherwise it is not art and it is not fun – that is why there is football, and design amongst others.

Thus, the idea that the designer is like a magician (or a writer, or a movie-maker), reveals how (creative, active) production is set apart from (passive) consumption/use, which is a traditional way of locating agency on the production side. The idea that the consumer may turn into a producer is not in fact a form of empowerment for the consumer, but it is actually concerned with "the dramatization of potential" that Sennett speaks about. What has changed now, according to Sennett, is "the participation of the consumer in the process of magnifying differences (...). The consumer is engaged by his or her own mobility and imagination. (...) The consumer participates in the act of branding, and in this act, it is the gold-plate rather than the platform which matters" (ibid: 148-149).

What is being played in the example I describe is a particular kind of potential: a potential that is determined by design conception. Clearly, the role Osvaldo imagines for the users of the tablecloth is one where the possible alternative uses of the table are already defined by the design. Thus, the contradiction is that according to his concept, the 'dramatization' of objects' 'possibilities' are determined by the conception (production) rather than consumption/use. That led to my question concerning the meaning behind the tablecloth idea – if its intended

meaning is for users to be more creative and use tables in alternative ways, then paradoxically the intention of encouraging creativity is quashed by instructing consumers, in other words, their creativity is diminished. He assumes that the meaning of things is determined by conception, rather than use. Drawing on a long epistemological tradition that considers the world of objects as inert, as if those things are just activated by people's intentions, Osvaldo remains focused on the production side of things rather than considering the ways dynamic processes shape meanings on the *consumption* side (Appadurai 1986), that is, on the role that users/consumers have in shaping those meanings.

For Appadurai, value is not determined by production, but rather through a dynamic process associated with consumption. In the same volume, Kopytoff emphasizes the possibility of commodities gaining social meanings in spheres apart from those determined by exchange, focusing specifically on the process of singularization. His point is that the shaping of objects' cultural meanings, that is, commodification, occurs within the context of consumption, therefore suggesting that wider social processes that involve people's relationships with objects, rather than just relationships of production, shape those objects socially. However, for Osvaldo, the social meaning of the table is designed, programmed, determined during the production stage. 'Alternative uses' in this project are uses that are defined by design, rather than use. Thus, the user can turn into a producer, but only within a limited set of options, pre-determined by design: the user can play golf or compose a song on glasses or whatever activity the cloth establishes by its design. This notion of custom-made items is popular within 'the Studio' – for example, while giving me some instances of the 'cultural' design projects that were going to be part of the *Fuori Salone* (as described in the previous chapter) Flora mentioned a project for a market in Trieste with pins, leds and magnets for people to create items, choosing from a selection of images. This is obviously different from mass production, however, it does not necessarily give users an active role: people are able to participate only within the determined set of options and play with combinations set out by designers: they are not invited to participate in the design conception – users/consumers are not given a creative role or an active participation in the production/creative process. In this regard, custom-made items are not so different from the Fordist passage from a black model-T to having a wide range of car colors to choose from: it is rather an intensification of this.

The point of the project, however, is that more than just a way of keeping production and consumption apart, it is a way of giving the consumer the *illusionary* feeling of participation and participation is a matter of illusion. This project was also a way of involving me in the process, although I was involved in ways that I would never have predicted. My involvement was rather minimal, I often asked to participate more in the projects as I wanted to be more than a spectator, and many times I complained to Osvaldo that I felt bored and frustrated by being unable to participate.

The choice for the title of the project actually came from a conversation we had, related to the idea of the mask. The Monday morning when I arrived in ‘the Studio’ and Luna was already working on the booklet, I realized that the project had a title: “nandopessoa”, which was obvious to me it had been Osvaldo’s idea. This had a personal impact as “nandopessoa” comes from Fernando Pessoa, who is my favorite poet. He came to know about this preference through another project, where he requested references, and Fernando Pessoa was the reference I gave. Fernando Pessoa is known for his many literary pseudonyms, that is why he made the link between the idea of mask with the intention to provoke me personally because of my “obsessive questioning” – specially regarding the general versus the specific – and about developing the story around the tablecloth idea as a conceptual mask for the table that changes its meaning/function according to the cloth it wears.

This was, indeed, the way Osvaldo found to involve me in – through ideas and imagination rather than active and practical or hands-on participation. His intention was to entrap me in my own study: my questioning was concerned with the absence of the specific, I found it all too abstract and concerned with making meaning rather than materiality. The kind of participation that I was allowed to engage in was filling the voids of (provocative) meaning that were left for me (that is why he stated that he was going to make the story ‘specific’), just like in advertising: “The sociologist Erving Goffman, in his last studies of advertising, (...) (e)mphasized that the most sophisticated forms of publicity are ‘half finished frames’ which invite the consumer to participate by filling in the picture. Ironic adverts do this; (...) The consumer is engaged by his or her own mobility and imagination: movement and incompleteness equally energize the imagination; fixidity and solidity equally deaden it.” (Sennett 2006: 149). Thus, there is no distinction between life/reality and representation/imagination: representation/imagination is the reality.

The only effects here are the effects of the play itself, the dramatization, but the lesson for me was that those effects are no less ‘real’.

My own questioning and resistances were not just personal and subjective anxieties, they became part of the research process, and were particularly generative ones in the provocative and playful relationship that unfolded. It was my presence and my reactions that stimulated this design project. The fact that my own questioning ends up involved in this dramatizing process, thus, reinforces the need to incorporate the body and emotions much more centrally into current conceptualizations of innovation processes.

Exploring a version of ‘live sociology’, Mike Michael (2012a) considers the role of objects as ‘idiotic’. Michael argues objects in social sciences “have by and large been treated as inert matter: stuff which, while it has had a central part to play in the mediation of social relations, has nevertheless largely stood in contrast to the subject” (ibid: 167). Drawing on STS tradition, he develops the argument that the object is not only an ‘object of study’, “but can also be part of the empirical ‘process of engagement’” (ibid). He means that objects contribute to the process of making the events of ‘sociological research’. What he adds to the STS version of the object is the notion that the object is not only processual and emergent, but perhaps more importantly, *relational* is the way in which they are ‘idiotic’ (a term he borrows from Isabelle Stengers, who in turn adapts it from Deleuze) – that is, “possessed of an incommensurable difference that enables us to ‘slow down’”. He illustrates this characteristic of the role of objects with an example of “a research object that went badly wrong” (‘a disastrous interview episode’ that involved a playful cat and an ‘idiotic’ tape recorder). Idiocy refers to when the objects themselves ‘go wrong’ or misbehave, something that radically undermines the meaning of the events in which they participate. “The idiot allows us to slow down – to take time to question our own assumptions about the event and to reinterpret it. The idiotic object affords an opportunity to engage in a process of, as Motamedi Fraser (Fraser 2010) puts it, ‘inventive problem making’ (ibid: 171). In this relationship, “the constitutive elements do not simply ‘interact’ with one another while retaining their identity, but change in the process of that interaction” (ibid: 170).

It was in this sense that I worked as an ‘idiotic’ object to the design inspiration of Osvaldo – and he worked likewise to my ethnographic research. Idiots prompt ‘inventive problem making’ – and in doing so, they generate *the new*. In what

concerns me, this idiotic encounter generated something that is not reduced to ‘ethnographic’ information. In the words of Michael, this idiocy “suggests a relationship to the empirical that is very different to that typically found in social science” (ibid: 174), as idiotic responses prompt the emergence of new idiotic ideas. As a methodology, the proactive idiocy does not “aspire to yield more or less accurate representations of the social world” and “they are not about problems or facts, but about the process of emergence of new relations which, potentially at least, can reconfigure what the very ‘fact’ or ‘problem’ might be” (ibid: 175). To Michael, this “‘idiotic sensibility *cum* sensitivity to the idiot’ that is bound up with the emerging design object<sup>58</sup> reflects what we might call ‘corporeal’ or ‘sensory’ or ‘affective scholarship’ (ibid: 174) – it is this sense of the ‘corporeal’ that is absent from traditional accounts of innovation within STS – the embodiedness that is missing from Latour and Yanevas’ explorations.

Following this final twist, which was the naming of the project (*nandopessoa*), graphic and textual changes were being made in the document in order to give the booklet its final form. Here is an account of the related discussion (my translations):

### **Oswaldo**

ciao + thanks for the images.

the setting looks perfect to me.

some observations:

precisely because it is a scenographic table,  
I wouldn’t put the cultivated explanation,  
but a little story,  
something like:

---

14th May 2009.

fired three months ago,

beppe the engineer has now run out of his grandmother’s money and whatever pittance was in his

---

<sup>58</sup> He draws on the practices and processes of speculative design to analyse if: “Is it possible to invent objects which have this property of idiocy (and becoming-with-ness) as a novel way of engaging with the processuality or openness of a specific social event?” (ibid: 171). He describes speculative design’s cultural probes (associated to the work of Bill Gaver), which, in brief, are items gathered together in small packages that are sent to volunteers and that “set seemingly peculiar tasks” (ibid: 173). These probes celebrate idiosyncrasy, risk and uncertainty of both the designers and the participants in the design process (ibid); they are also provocative and entertaining. Methodologically, he suggests that “speculative design can itself be portrayed as sociology’s idiot: it enacts a way of engaging with the (social) world that, in principle at least, affords the opportunity for inventive problem-making within sociological practice” (ibid: 177).

money box.

without work and without money, also the creepy rosanna ambrosetti (the famous berta) has left him.  
in a house with almost a sea view, alone, sad and tired.

time for dinner, but the desire to eat is none (money for buying food: less than none).

fortunately, his friends have gave him “nandopessoa”: a special set of six tablecloths and napkins  
which can change your life.

like the famous writer from whom our product borrows its name (who used to write pretending to be  
thirty different people while he was none of them), here we have an ingenious product that allows one  
to transform life in the blink of an eye.

you lost your girlfriend or boyfriend?

you don't have enough money to buy a decent dinner?

you lead a disgusting life?

no problem.

you can set the tablecloth “xylophone” which allows you to transform yourself in a virtuous musician,  
as if you were jimi hendrix at woodstock.

the tablecloth “tigerwoods” allows you to transform into a budding tiger woods, in a few seconds the  
table becomes a route of 18 holes

then there is “hortus apparecchiatu”: a prodigious inside garden where you can plant the most  
extraordinary herbs just like don bairo<sup>59</sup>.

six settings for six different lives: design at our disposal to transfigure our life in unexpected ways.

enough with the five-hundred-euro tables, enough with the signatures and the *griffe*.

we are in the time of masks: here is the mask to give dignity and joy to your (pathetic) table and to  
your (disgusting) life.

anyway, the glass is half empty or half full, depending on how one looks at it.

a project where finally one makes a clean sweep of each dissimulation:

a life where the glass is always half empty or almost empty.

or empty of everything or if it is full then it falls down and it breaks into

a thousand pieces (over which you would walk barefoot thinking you had swept it all away).

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also available in a custom-made version for wedding lists, trousseaus, and funerals.

[...]

ps.

a quotation for table golf:

Golf is life. If you can't take golf, you can't take life.

---

<sup>59</sup> Dom Bairo "l'Uvamaro" is a mythical Italian bitter wine, born in the sixties but no longer in production.

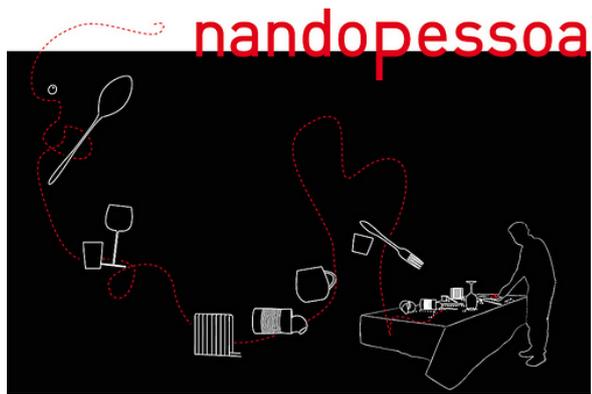


Figure 22



Figure 23

Xilofono

Il tuo tavolo permette di trasformarti in un virtuoso della musica.  
 Posiziona i bicchieri sui cerchi e riempi di acqua o vino bianco come indicato dalle linee di cucitura.  
 I bicchieri così disposti produrranno una scala di suoni, dal più grave (pieno) al più acuto (vuoto).  
 Componi le tue melodie o suona quelle stampate sui tovaglioli. La scala di suoni è stata ricavata empiricamente, attraverso una serie di piacevoli esperimenti.

Figure 24

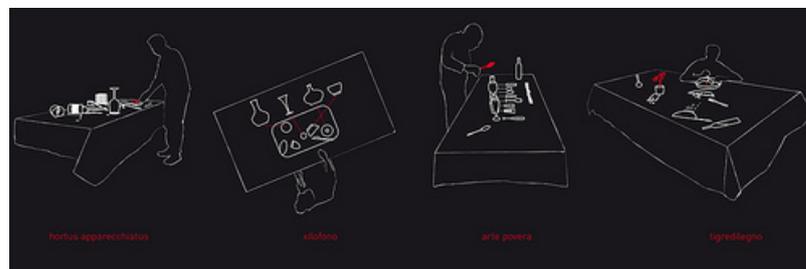


Figure 25

Figures 22 to 25: Some pages of the booklet of the project “Nandopessoa” in its final version.

The booklet – with this story and corresponding pictures – is literally a performative device, a dramatization that is part of the whole ‘dramatization of potential’ that the project is. Whereas Albena Yaneva (2009: 74) describes concept books in Rem Koolhaas’s architectural office as open processes that are, in that sense, not just illustrations of projects’ concepts but performative, organizational devices, that along with other visuals “allow designers *to go back* and rethink the design moves previously made” (ibid: 72), here instead, designers use the concept book to present the concept in a rather finished way, as a symbolic dramatization of the design process. “Rather than presenting the main building’s concepts and its big ideas, a concept book made by OMA restages moments of office life on its pages and re-enacts the main design events that made this building possible”.

The booklet in ‘the Studio’, however, is not a means to something else (like a building): it is the building, the object itself and as such, the ‘medium is the message’ (McLuhan 1964). The project, in that sense, becomes an object itself. These kinds of booklets are not meant to leave traces of the process openly, they are not meant to keep traces of exploration, or, using an ANT famous concept, they will later become *black-boxed* (Latour 1987): that is, the contingencies of the process of making that generated them will later become invisible. This I think is an important point of contrast with Yaneva’s account of concept books, that she describes as: “Far from being black-boxed, aesthetically polished illustrations attesting to stabilized epistemic objects and certain knowledge, the visuals are presented in the book as dynamics cognitive objects, tentative and open, having a crucial performative impact on design practice. They offer no signs of big ideas or great leaps of imagination, but traces of executive doing, of design investigations” (ibid: 73). In my example, in contrast, what the booklet *performs* is precisely ‘great leaps of imagination’, and it is all about imagination, an abstract, symbolic, allegoric story that is not a means to something else beyond the story, the dramatization itself. And what happens to these ‘objects’? What are they made for? How do they circulate?

Much work in the lab goes into keeping an online archive with registers of all activities held. Usually any design website must contain a collection of projects. One important aspect of this project, and its main output, is that the graphic work of communication that was done for the booklet – pictures and text – is later added to their portfolio collection on their website. Work is always completed with that in mind. The communication of projects is often more important than projects

themselves. Sometimes the virtual existence of these projects is more important than its real one, or in other words, as in this case, there is no 'real' one: this is it. Like a football game. Self-referentially, these projects are their communication<sup>60</sup>. Good communication not only increases the company's prestige and attracts further clients and further collaborators; it also improves the designers' CVs. These projects become indexes of designers' creativity – they index the creative agency of their authors (Leach 2011). Within a culture where innovation is fostered, these projects become an instrument for publicizing talent, “the instrument through which certain kinds of persons (those in competition with one another and needing a way of publicizing their work (...) are mobilized”<sup>61</sup> (cf. Leach 2004: 153). Thus, design projects often have no other practical purpose than acting as social mediators of designers' own prestige among the designers' community, where they exert this particular power of wonder that Gell (1992) talks about, indexing the intellectual virtuosity of their creators. Conceptuality, in this regard, has this communicative 'function': it works in a *parallel* system where ideas and cultural capital have an exchange-value rather than a use-value.

The word *parallel* here is particularly relevant. After the project was submitted, two months later there was news that it was awarded first prize (in *exequo*- joint winner – with another project), for “having interpreted with provocative irony the existential crisis of our times through a domestic alternative toy”. I thought that this would mean that the concretization of the project would actually take place and that I would *finally* have the opportunity to see something concrete happen outside 'the Studio'. By that time, I thought that too much time was spent on the abstract and planning of things and I was always wondering how things actually got done, how do people react to concrete events, outside of their designers' worlds and heads – I was living in a 'use-value' system. But that is the point – there is no world outside. This design activity in which they are engaged with is very much a self-referential activity, or, to borrow Thrift's (2005) idea about the business world, 'autopoietic'.

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<sup>60</sup> To Lucy Suchman (1993: 28) this self-referentiality in design or, as she puts it, this “organizational egocentrism”, is concerned with the self-conscious construction of 'corporate culture', in which she refers to a process of “*detached engagement* by many scientific and technical professionals with the work of technology production, through the joint creation of an elaborate social world within which one can be deeply engaged, but which remains largely self-referential, cut-off from others who might seriously challenge aspects of the community's practice”.

<sup>61</sup> Leach (2004), however, is concentrated on the mechanisms through which creativity becomes potentially property, namely through Intellectual Property.

The attribution of the award (5,000 euros) took place in a party, on the 18th of September 2009. Osvaldo went to receive the prize with Luna – who was then being trained to substitute Lisen who was about to move to another job. When I asked them how it went, Osvaldo told me that it was a party that they usually organize to entertain their staff and customers – the competition had been organized by this important furniture company of Verona, by business people. He said I could ask Luna more details about it – Luna smiled at me, condescendingly. I asked him, a little disappointed, “so, is that it? The tablecloth is not going to be produced?” Smiling in response to my naive question, he said no, that competition was not meant to produce anything, but just a moment of entertainment, the tablecloth was just those *15 minutes of culture* in the party, among lots of nice food and drinks, and Russian prostitutes... “You see, the world of furniture”, he explained, “consists of very rich business people and sometimes they organize these events, and it is they who decide to include a moment of culture...” So the project was not a means to something else; it was an end in itself. As play, it was a non-instrumental activity. However, the paradox is that the ‘real economy’ of commodities, clients and markets is still there, unchanged by the ‘conceptual design’, which seems to work in another, *parallel* dimension, without necessarily a connection, apart from a ludic, perhaps ritual one. So if there is an outside, this is it.

## **Conclusion: design as (deep) play and change as a form of drama**

Just as in the classic anthropologic essay *Balinese Cockfight* (Geertz 1973), there is a question of status at stake in design-as-play, intellectual status. These designers are not making money, they are not making art either: they are creating status. Designers who make ‘conceptual work’ gain respect from other designers within the design community especially if it is an academic design community. This is the ritual, immaterial side of material economy. As in any other societies, post-industrial western ones are governed by a sociomoral hierarchy in which those who produce commodities for the market have less prestige than those who produce ideas

– despite the possibility that ideas may later become commodities themselves. Just as in *Balinese Cockfight*, conceptual design processes can be seen as a ritual dramatization of (intellectual) status within a post-industrial context where commodities are taken for granted and seen as banal.

Thus, Osvaldo's metaphor of design as football, which he uses to describe 'the conceptuality' of his work is quite relevant: just as football 'is only game', or the *Balinese Cockfight* is 'only a cockfight' (ibid: 440), the conceptual design performance I described 'was only a moment of culture', an interruption in the course of ordinary life of (parallel, outside) business. It does not change it, it keeps things going on – this is a ritualized form of 'change'. In this regard, I described how the exercise keeps production separate from consumption (or conception from reception), and how the idea that innovation is guided by play and the search for the new, rather than catering for functional needs. Play is precisely this ritual form in post-industrial economic societies, where there is no distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction'. Images, fiction, metaphors, models and conceptual maps are all part of play. What is important is not the material effects of play but its ritual ones. There are objects involved (the project booklet and the tables it refers to), which surely have a mediating role, however that is not what is important to designers. This ritual function keeps things as they are – the boundaries between utilitarian commodities and meaningful conceptual objects, reality and potential. Instead of rupture, there is continuity: continuity of a hierarchy between material and immaterial work, material and immaterial economy, real life and art, expert knowledge and lay people/producers and consumers. As I described in the previous chapter, in Milan the 'real' industry goes on (exhibited every year in the Salone) and *in parallel* there is the ritual side of the economy, the *Fuori Salone* and its cultural, conceptual events. To put it differently: despite designers emphasis on change and constant innovation – and despite all the theoretical enthusiasm about the changes in late economy, the knowledge economy and 'immaterial work' (Lazzarato 1996; Bonomi *et al* 2006; Virno & Hardt 1996; Marazzi 2008) – what this example shows is that nothing new was produced, but rather the old was ritualized: using Suchman & Bishop's idea (2000: 332) this is, in that regard, 'innovation' as a conservative project – they argue that "(e)ven to keep things going on 'in the same way' in practice requires continuous, mundane forms of active appropriation and adaptation of available resources – discursive, material, symbolic – to the circumstances at hand". When

there is no change, or the possibility for change, the dramatization of potential is the *illusion of change*, that is, play (Sennett 2006: 160-161). This aspect contrasts with STS accounts of innovation in the sense that there is nothing compared to *gaining reality* here (Latour 1996), but there is another process operating: I call this process the dramatization of change.

Noticing that I was too concerned with the practical effects of their projects, Osvaldo used this dramatization provocatively to teach me that change does not need to have practical or necessarily material effects, the important thing is to create the illusion of change (play). A great part of what in our culture is considered innovation has a lot to do with just the illusion of change and the dramatization of potential that Sennett (2006) talks about. My own questioning about the abstractness of the process and the absence of materiality became part of the process – it became part of what makes it highly contingent and improvised. In this relationship, *I* was the relational and generative (idiotic) *outside*. At the same time, it was these unexpected (idiotic) relationalities that made me look at the dramatized aspects of innovation, rather than just the materialities of innovation-in-the-making. These relationalities provoked an inventive problem-making process that Mike Michael refers to (2012a; b). More than just an explicit form of collaboration between design and ethnography (see for example Crabtree & Rodden 2002; Suchman 2011; Dourish & Bell 2011; Wasson 2002), this is, as Michael (2012a) puts it, “a subterranean form of ‘sociality’ being enacted, what we might call the mutual idiocy between researcher and participant. This can be likened to a non-dialogical conversation where mirrored incommensurability nevertheless triggers affects, reactions and responses which mediate a parallel inventive problem-making” (ibid: 179).

Thus, my concern with the question concerning whether or not design ideas precede their actual shaping turned out to be irrelevant – what is relevant is what that question is used for. In that sense, what this example shows is not just the *trajectorial* nature of design (Yaneva 2009: 28) nor just that thinking happens in the making, which is already taken for granted by designers. Here there is no abstract planning on the one side (what people say they do) and the ‘real’ contingent improvised action on the other (what people actually do). In contrast with what ANT-inspired approaches on innovation defend (such as Yaneva 2009), the belief that *there is in fact something potentially novel and radical in the acts of design invention* (the idealized act of creation) (cf. Yaneva 2009: 96) is something that we

should not underestimate, as it is what moves these designers: it turned out to be ethnographically meaningful in unforeseen ways. That what counts as practice is not just material practices (working with objects) nor mediations but the work on the symbolic (and the simulation of difference) also reveals something very concrete, trajectorial and interactive. Thus, there is no ideal notion of practice to be imposed on the ethnography: to consider as practice the technical mediations or ‘the mundane trajectories and routine tasks’ is to dismiss the importance designers give ‘in practice’ to narratives that break with the past, even though illusory ones, and the way projects as such work as enactments of potential change.

### 3. 'Learning-by-doing'

#### The performativity of 'practical' learning in design education

In 2009, Osvaldo was the director of the design department of the 'the design School'<sup>62</sup>, where 'learning by doing' is the motto. He takes credit for the introduction of this philosophy: "in the three years that I have been the head of the design school we made this cultural revolution (to transform 'the School' into one synonymous with making things rather than solely listening to professors)"<sup>63</sup>. Learning by doing is also presented officially in the website of 'the School' as a contrast to traditional academic institutions, as an alternative to mainstream education. Since its foundation, his school was "aimed at challenging the rigid academic tradition by introducing new visions and languages closed (sic) to contemporary artistic practice and the creative and artistic professions"<sup>64</sup>. In fact, the teaching methods there are very 'hands-on' and based on workshops – studio-based rather than course-based. Learning by doing, however, is not specific to 'the School', it is rather part of a wider trend in new media and visual arts education, where "(e)mbodied, performative pedagogies lie at the heart of contemporary arts curriculum" (Grushka 2010: 10). This is certainly related to the idea that visual education requires specific – more embodied – skills compared to other forms of education where words rather than images/objects have a central role<sup>65</sup>. But what does 'learning by doing' really mean in this context, and what is it used for? In what sense is it a 'revolution'?

The chapter proposes to look at the context where 'learning by doing' is performed. My question is that if 'learning by doing' suggests a practical and embodied approach to knowledge, how can it coexist with the predominant emphasis on 'conceptuality' in design – the centrality of conception and the idea that design should create ideas, rather than functional objects – in other words, how can it

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62 'The School' is generally an Arts Academy, divided in other artistic sub-areas: Osvaldo was the director of the design department.

63 E-mail, 14-06-2009

64 The school's website (accessed 23-01-2012).

65 See the claims of specificity of 'visual literacy' in Naylor & Ball 2005, as discussed in the previous chapter, Fiction.

coexist with the dominance of the project, the plans rather than the situated actions (Suchman 1987) or the map based scopic regime (Turnbull 2009: 135) – that is, a rationalist, top-down approach to design?

## **Knowledge and the priority of practice**

The idea of "learning-by-doing" has a specific genealogy within the anthropology of practice where it is part of a larger interest in the body. Practical approaches to learning are influenced by phenomenology, where "embodied knowledge is knowledge incorporated not just by the material body but by a being comprising of mind, body and environment" (Gieser 2008: 303).

One of the concepts that lie at the basis of this notion is 'tacit knowledge', a concept that was first developed by Michael Polanyi in the 1950's, referring to the kind of knowledge that contrasts with explicit or propositional knowledge: tacit knowledge "is knowledge we have, and know we have, but nonetheless cannot put into words", in other words, "all those things that we know how to do but perhaps do not know how to explain (at least symbolically)"<sup>66</sup>. Polanyi argued that this type of knowledge is not captured by language or mathematics: we can see it only by its action. It is best seen in the way we possess a skill: how to swim, or to ride a bicycle, for example. Because it cannot be encoded symbolically, tacit knowledge collapses the hierarchy that privileges propositional knowledge over the hands-on skills, with its unwritten rules neglected and devalued (cf. *ibid.*).

Within this practical approach to learning, cognition is seen as a situated activity, no longer taken out of context (Pálsson 1998: 909). Knowledge is rather understood as actively engaged with an environment (Pálsson 1994: 901), "a social activity that goes on within the context of people's mutual involvement in a richly structured environment" (Gunn 2004: 1). This also corresponds to an 'ecological' approach to knowledge, where emphasis is put "on the socially situated aspects of learning rather than on solely individualistic mechanisms of knowledge transfer"

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<sup>66</sup>"Tacit Knowledge: Making it Explicit". Working paper on the Project '*A Tool kit for Travelling 'Facts'*' - LSE - Economic History. Available online: <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/facts/AboutTheProject.aspx#generated-subheading5> (accessed 16/01/2012).

(Simpson 1997: 46). For example, Edwin Hutchins (1995: 370) attempts to re-embodiment cognition, locating cognitive activity in context: he contends that the locus of knowledge is not inside the individual mind, but rather that learning happens in the doing (ibid: 373), or another way of putting it, knowledge is distributed through the environment.

Also associated to this practical approach to learning is the notion of *enskilment*, which implies shifting the idea that “skill is the mere application of knowledge” as if “knowledge is transmitted in a disembodied, context-free form – that is, as information – independently and in advance of its application in specific contexts of practice” (Gunn 2004: 1). Rather than being based on the notion of an autonomous individual, *enskilment* is seen necessarily as a collective enterprise, involving whole persons, social relations and communities of practice (Pálsson 1994: 902; Lave & Wenger 1991). From this perspective, what matters is the relationships that make knowledge emerge (Grasseni 2004: 49). The notion of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991) is also based on the idea that learning is a social phenomenon through the lived experience of participation in a community of practitioners – the idea that learning is not separable from membership of a community responsible for the circulation and distribution of knowledge.

Overall, these are all expressions of a practice theory that offers an alternative view of learning, "a radical break with the Cartesian tradition of separating ideas and the real world, learning and doing, experts and laypersons, knowledge and practice" (Pálsson 1994: 904). A *practical* approach is therefore opposed to a *normative* one, where learning is seen as a recipe for action and the person is thought of in terms of a container, and tutors are mere recipients "submitted to a body of knowledge given in advance" (ibid: 903). Tacit/practical knowledge is thus seen as an alternative to formal schooling (ibid: 916), a proposal to look beyond literary dominant knowledge processes that are based in a normative theory: the one which assumes a hierarchical ordering of knowledge, reinforcing "the tradition of literacy and the institutions of formal schooling and disembedded training", misconstruing "the essence of the lived-in world, failing to capture what it means to engage in a skilful act, the 'feel' for the game" (ibid.).

One of the most important figures in the practical learning debates is Tim Ingold (2000), for whom embodied skill is not just a matter of implementing mechanically a fixed sequence of instructions; in his view, rules do not determine the

course of action<sup>67</sup>. Echoing Bourdieu's post-structuralist theory of practice (1977), he sets up a distinction between making and growing. For Ingold, growing is a metaphor for enskilment and the idea that there is no pure, rational conception<sup>68</sup>. Growing is concerned with skilled movement: for example, a basket does not arise from a previous idea, "(i)t rather comes into being through the gradual unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material" (ibid: 342). Skilled activity is thus depicted as a material process, whereby "the properties of materials are directly implicated in the form-generating process" (ibid: 345). In this view, conception, "like genes (...) set the parameters of the process but do not prefigure the form" (ibid.): rather, "(i)t is the activity itself (...) that generates the form, not the design that precedes it" (ibid. 354).

Underlying these theories is the assumption that conception is one thing (representation and 'mental models') and the actual taking form is quite another one: an example of the divide between representation and action/reality. How far is this form of prioritization of practice over theory another form of a broader purification exercise (Latour 1993a) – one of the big dualisms of modernity? For example, David Bloor (2001) questions the sustainability of this priority by looking into the work of Wittgenstein, namely his analysis of the self-referentiality of institutions. Bloor does not compromise the principle of the priority of practice as he argues that this self-referentiality does not undermine the practicality of our knowledge, but rather describes a precondition of it. "Practical activity, unlike 'theoretical' activity, implies an engagement with a reality independent of ourselves and our thoughts." (ibid: 104).

I propose to contribute to this debate by looking at what exactly is happening to 'knowledge'/learning in design. What do designers mean when they assert that 'learning-by-doing' is the most important form of knowledge? My proposal is thus to look at how 'theories of practice' are themselves used and performed in particular ways. Instead of choosing a prioritization beforehand, I propose to examine what kind of relationships and prioritizations between theory and practice do they make through their uses of 'practice'/practical learning. I will refer to the 'dramatization of practice' by looking at how 'practice', as a concept, is actually used/performed within the design context – what I explore is, thus, a *practice of practice*. Like Bloor,

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<sup>67</sup> This echoes the Wittgensteinian 'rules do not contain the rules for their own application' (cf. Collins 2001: 110).

<sup>68</sup> Another metaphor he uses is line-making: a line that goes for a walk vs. point-to-point transport.

I do not compromise the principle of the priority of practice, I rather extend it to a meta-level of perspective that ethnography requires (applying the equivalent of Gell's 'methodological philistinism', 1992, to our own discipline) in order to look at the uses of 'practice'.

## **"Eat or die" - designing the course**

While I was in 'the Studio', I had the opportunity to follow some activities in 'the School' too. One of these was a teaching course called *Metodologia Progettuale* (Design Methodology). The course was taught by Vardit, a designer I knew from another project, a workshop, where I noticed that she had an approach to design that contrasts with 'the Studio' in the sense that she seemed to me more based in material experimentation compared to the 'conceptuality' that I was used to in 'the Studio'. She is an Israeli (of Polish Jewish origin), and comes from a specific design tradition (the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, in Jerusalem, a prestigious design school, particularly appreciated among the network of 'the Studio') that is known for a "very materialist, whilst nonetheless conceptual" approach, as she once explained to me.

Vardit was thinking about using observation methods in the 'conceptual' stage of this course, and so she invited me to participate by introducing the concept of ethnographic 'participant observation'. The idea was to work around the topic of food: "eating in extreme situations" – later it was to be called 'eat or die'. This would be the topic for students' final projects, their theses. I met with her and her assistant several times to discuss the idea and talk about the plans for the course. The assistant was Ascanio, a student I knew from the same workshop where I met Vardit, and who had recently finished his degree in 'the School'.

The idea was still open: the course was meant to be a research course, so she wanted it to be "really experimental", explorative, and in that regard, she would welcome ideas from ethnography, about which she showed curiosity. "Extreme situations" could be geographic (eating in the desert, for example, or in the mountains, that is, eating in adverse situations), but also social (poverty, migration). By "extreme situations" she meant generally the different, but an underprivileged

kind of different: the poor, the migrants, nomads – the culturally different. She mentions the Bedouins in Morocco, or the context of refugees' camps as examples. From my interaction with her, I understood that Vardit is a political engaged person: she is feminist, vegetarian, slightly hippie and a militant ecologist with a preference for craft, for organic food, Fair Trade and the like. This motivation for social causes and political commitment somehow frames her conception of this course, and perhaps her approach to design more broadly. In "extreme situations", she says, aesthetics has no place and people lose their human dignity. So design, she thinks, could answer those problems by restoring that dignity, "because design cannot be just for the rich, and this idea of aesthetics as a privilege of the very few has to come to an end", she argued. "Objects, (design) solutions, should be ideas that would call our attention to those problems, not to resolve them – directly, one can not do anything; but indirectly, it makes us think about it", she said.

The course starts from a problem: according to Vardit, most of what is done in design nowadays around food is food design, which became a fashion, or the design of small appetizers to be served in parties, which is also very widespread. "But no one thinks about the experience of eating – what is eating?" she asks, expressing the need to search the "primordial", "essential act of eating". Her intention is to push students to develop something that "raises questions", to make things that are beyond aesthetics, more than just beautiful "food design". We were at 'the School's' canteen discussing these ideas, when at a certain point Romolo, a mechanical engineer who also belongs to 'the Studio', joined us for lunch. Romolo and Ascanio are both Pugliese (from Puglia, a region in the south of Italy) and so Vardit asked them what is it like to eat in the south of Italy? "If one would eat in Milan as one eats in the south of Italy one couldn't even work in the afternoon", Romolo said. Talking about the south of Italy with some (urban) distance, as if almost an exotic place, they explain that lunch is a very long meal that can take hours as it is the most important meal of the day, and everyone has to eat at home with the family because it is a family ritual. Vardit contrasts it with her experience in Israel, where eating is a much more individualistic concept, and she gives some examples of restaurant concepts that are innovative, talking about why they became a success. Picking up this cultural contrast, I commented how interesting it is to realize that eating is much more than just a physiological thing – when one eats, one is not only consuming food, but also ideas – ideas of style, tradition, ritual, etc. Ascanio

commented that "food design" is also based on that idea. To Vardit, that is precisely the problem with food design: "food became too much of other things than just food, less physical matter and more ideas; too *cosmetic*; but what is missing is to think about what is eating in extreme situations: poverty, in the mountain, in the desert, in the army..." Although I was referring to the contrast between the examples, to what is common about them – to the fact that eating, generally speaking, and quite common-sensely is not reduced to biology but it is mostly a cultural thing – curiously they interpreted it differently: they thought I was referring to 'ideas' as a kind of 'evolution', where a more 'natural' situation (eating in the South of Italy) is substituted by a more 'complex', 'sophisticated' and 'artificial' one (eating food design in fancy restaurants in Israel). This misunderstanding is not by chance: it was how I learned that this is what they wanted to 'deconstruct' after-all, and this was indeed what they wanted to use 'observation' for: they wanted go back to the 'more natural' and 'more authentic' version. Vardit's proposal was to reduce eating to its essentiality, stripping it of all that is "secondary".<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, what she expected from the use of "participant observation" was a way of researching the "primordial" and "primitive" act of eating. She accounts that she is reading a book about the "evolution of objects"<sup>70</sup> that tells the history of the use of eating utensils (cutlery, forks and spoons), "which started in Italy in the 18th century, and then it was taken by an Englishman to the king's court. When the Englishman said there that he had seen this, everyone mocked him up because before the 18th century, no one used cutlery – during the Middle Ages, people used to eat with their hands. Only since then the use of cutlery was introduced, and by this time, people started to use five types of cutlery at once". Vardit sees this as an example of how, throughout history, we ended up distancing ourselves from "that primordial act of eating, and from its sensoriality, the direct contact of the body with the food". Cutlery, she states, "introduces something that is *artificial* and breaks that relationship, transforming eating into an aseptic act". Thus, she wanted to use 'observation' to get rid of all the cultural aspects that are associated with food consumption, which paradoxically contradicts the very aim of (participant, ethnographic) 'observation'. Ideas about 'eating' are thus framed within what she

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<sup>69</sup> Here we can probably identify the modernist influence from Gropius's "study of essentials", for whom ornament was considered superfluous.

<sup>70</sup> "The Evolution of Useful Things" by Henry Petroski. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

already assumes about it, unquestioned dichotomies, such as for example natural versus artificial. What follows from here is an account of the troubled relationships between representations of knowledge about the world and knowledge of the world, or mostly how representations are taken for action, 'real' knowledge of the world, and how sometimes 'action' changes those same assumptions.

## **The concept of 'observation' in design: needs and desires**

As Vardit wanted me to talk about my presentation, we set up a meeting to discuss the plans for the 'participant observation' exercise. Although apparently plans were open, Vardit already had a clear notion of what she intended 'participant observation' to mean: the exercises of 'observation' about eating she was imagining consisted of asking students to bring food with them and have a picnic outdoors, and then to document their experience and show it to the class afterwards; another exercise was going to a restaurant with their eyes shut in order to experience how it is to eat in the dark.

In that meeting, I showed them what I had prepared: I was going to explain what ethnography is, as a method, and its role in the discipline of anthropology, and particularly, what we mean by "participant observation" as a method and how we use it. In a second step I would outline how I think ethnography could be important to the design process (arguing that if inspired by ethnographic methods, designers can train themselves to be good observers, and do "participant observation" for their own purposes). After discussing this presentation point by point – we even talked about Malinowski, as I had sent them a BBC film about Malinowski – but I noticed that Vardit's idea for the "observation" exercises remained unchanged: her plans were to have a picnic outdoors, for about an hour, and this would be part of the 'observation' exercise. She would ask students to bring food with them and then to document their experience and show it to class afterwards that afternoon. So I expressed my concern that this exercise would in some way be paradoxical in relation to what I was going to transmit, because my emphasis on the idea ethnographic 'observation' would be to establish a relationship; thus, I told them that self-observation is fine, but it is not ethnographic, it is not participant observation. Then she had another suggestion: to present this exercise as a first part, a kind of introduction to the 'real' observational

exercise. This, instead, would consist of observing and spending some time, a week maybe, with someone in a more ethnographic style, sharing meals, observing eating habits and behaviors.

As ‘real observation’ they suggested doing a picnic with homeless people – until I called their attention to some ethical and practical problems that may arise. As an alternative, I suggested it would be a better idea if they do the exercise with someone they already know – friends, neighbors, etc. Perhaps they could reduce the relationship to one person, instead of a group. Then, Ascanio had a good idea: as this was meant to be a relationship, students would design a specific object for the person they would interact with. Very pragmatically, the idea of having to present an object as a result of the exercise would be way of making them responsible for the assignment and then they would actually do the observation exercise, otherwise they may skip it. We all liked this idea very much. Vardit told us she was “very pleased with the direction this course was taking”. So I thought that we reached an understanding and that I finally managed to make them understand what the ethnographic conception of ‘observation’ really implies, however the exercise proved far more unpredictable – as I will show, in the process it was me who ended up learning how the introduction of this ‘new concept’ reveals specific understandings of ‘observation’ that they already had and that were unforeseen to me.<sup>71</sup>

The class where I was going to make my presentation about ethnography started with Vardit making a reflection upon observation in design: she asked students in what ways do they use observation? "Without observation there is no design", she said. "Observation is necessary to understand a need and respond to that need, so I make a proof, I observe it, and then I correct it". "The observation is the recognition that something is not working right and thinking how to fix it" – it is finding a problem. This ‘observation’ that Vardit was referring to is one of the linear steps in the sequence of design method as a problem-solving activity: it is one of the intermediate steps. Referring to the superficiality of a kind of industrial design that takes aesthetics as its primary concern, Vardit called students’ attention to the

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71 At this point, my intention was to participate in the exercises as well, and I even suggested it and Vardit accepted, however, in practice, things turned out more complicated: on the one side, my status was ambiguous because I was on the ‘teaching’ side; and at some point I decided that, being impossible to be on both sides, and having to choose one perspective, it was more interesting to follow the relationship I had already created with Vardit and Ascanio; the other reason was that I would not carry the exercises until the end (which would imply developing the prototypes), as my fieldwork would end a few weeks later (December 2009), and the course was going to continue into the following semester – it would last one entire academic year.

importance of studying needs: "Philip Stark treats form without thinking about the needs". "Desires are not needs, they are just for the owner (of the manufacture company) to fill his pockets, who tries to give clients what they want: but these are not needs, it is just playing with form, whereas design, on the other hand, always starts from a function and develops objects to be used". Thus (in a modernist design tradition) she emphasizes a hierarchical distinction between needs and desires. "In the last *Salone* (Milan's design week)" she said, "there were only a few new objects, there were some little novelties, whereas in modernity objects are born from needs"<sup>72</sup>: Charles Eames used to study new typologies of sitting in chairs and how they could be produced in the most economic way possible".

Innovation, in Vardit's conception, emerges from the identification of 'real' needs, whereas 'giving clients what they want' is the opposite of innovation: it is just playing with aesthetics and form for commercial reasons. She wanted to use observation to 'observe' those 'needs'.

After this reflection about 'observation' in design, I did my presentation about 'observation' in ethnography, stressing the idea of participation as a learning process that is concerned with a relationship with others. Picking up my message about 'ethnographic observation', and comparing it with the design version – to which she finds "a lot of things in common" – Vardit encourages students to be explorative and open about their projects: instead of starting with a plan, they should 'observe' people and try to learn from them and only afterwards develop the project and design an object *for each of them*. Vardit explained to the students that they were supposed to use this method during their projects – she told them about the exercise for the following week, which would be creating a relationship with someone, focusing on their food habits and routines; she also told them that they would use 'field-diaries' in that process. This, she said, would be important to arrive at "needs" rather than "desires"; "arriving at design solutions which are more reflective about what people really need, rather than what the designer wants in advance".

However, one of the students, Rufino, questioned why self-observation would not suffice – he could not understand the need to move from self-observation, something that they are used to, to the observation of other people. He asked Vardit

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<sup>72</sup> Modernist design was the 'golden age' of design: with the industrial intensification of the 1950's, design was for mass production consumer objects, whose aesthetics reflected the "democratic" cause of making desirable products affordable to all people. It was also the "form-follows-function" period (Neumann 1999).

what was the point of it all – those participant observation exercises – if after all, they were going to design what they wanted anyway? Vardit told him that self-observation, though important in the design process, sometimes is not enough: "when we want to design a fork, for example, we look at ourselves and see what would we like to improve or to change in it, and then, we are going to observe other people to confirm. But when we want to design something for specific people, for example people with special needs, or disabled people, we should observe them and design something specific for them". Thus, I started realizing that the way Vardit sees the potential value of 'ethnographic observation' in design is not as a dialogic relationship of practice, it is rather a way of designing *for* someone, which is a way of reinforcing a modernist conception of design as intervention – which in the end may only confirm Rufino's concerns. In other words, this 'observation' was not being understood as an interactive relationship that can have effects on the way the project develops, and where agency is shared, but rather, the agency that counts as agency is the designer's agency. Paradoxically to the practice theories of learning that I outlined above, agency is being located in conception rather than in the ongoing activity of making. So designer A interacts with person B, developing an object for B. The object is not a result of the interaction between A+B. It is a relationship where A is the 'author' and B is the recipient, using Gell's terms (1998).

Vardit also provided some literature about food so that students could explore it freely. Looking at the index of one of the books, one student asked her if should they choose topics that are already related to the topic they wanted to work on. Vardit said no, regardless of the course that their project will take, it would be more interesting to look for what *tells* them something (with a gesture pointing out to her belly) because this way, the project will be constructed along the way, and this is what is interesting about it: it is the process, she said. "Picasso used to say that had he known in advance the form that a work was going take, it wouldn't be worth doing it". Thus, on the one hand, the openness and unpredictable trajectory of the process is stressed and even stimulated in a 'learning-by-doing' style and an embodied, sensorial process is stimulated. But on the other hand, the process is presented as ways of solving people's real problems, for people's special needs – as if 'objective' needs were independent from designers' agency. Observation is thus framed within a cognitive, mentalistic model of action, although an unplanned and 'open' one, whereas 'needs' are projected outside the conception process. The unpredictability of

the process that Vardit suggests remains restricted to a subjective process: it is internalized, it is a way of stimulating creative ‘minds’ for producing better ‘solutions’ to people’s needs; whereas ‘people’ and their ‘needs’ are separated from the creative process, as if they are outside it. This suggests an absence of phenomenological change: the idea that creation is the product of an author’s internal labor rather than a relationship, which also underlies an innovation-centered notion of creativity. The idea that there is thus no phenomenological ‘creativity’ is based on the assumption of objectivity. In this understanding, the use of ethnography (participant observation) seems to be reduced to a form of ‘information’ – something excluded from the creative process (Crabtree & Rodden 2002), which is something that resonates the distinctions between art-as-knowledge making and science-as-knowledge-making as they emerge in the collaborating practices described by James Leach (2011).

Leach observed that in the collaborations between art and science, scientists were represented as not being creative in a subjective sense, but rather as establishing relations between things already there, entities that already exist independently of any human subject (ibid: 145; 160). He shows, these distinctions are “‘tied up with the way that the actors (scientists and artists) perceived their personal and individual relation to the material that they worked with and to the knowledge outcomes or objects that they produced” (ibid: 144). In the process that I am describing, this separation between outside (information about people’s food habits as the ‘things already there’) and inside (the transformation of this ‘information’ through a subjective process of creativity) is also being *enacted*<sup>73</sup>.

## **Internalizing the ‘outside’ and externalizing the ‘inside’**

Following the session on ‘observation’ there came the moment to put ‘observation’ in practice. First, there would be the preliminary observation exercises and some weeks later, the ‘real’ participant ones. One the preliminary exercises of ‘observation’ that Vardit had planned was asking students to take their lunches out

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<sup>73</sup> Enactments refer to “the continual and ongoing production and reproduction of aspects of social reality” (Dourish & Bell 2011: 79).

and look for the most unlikely place that they could find to picnic, and then photograph the experience. Each group should print ten images representative of the experience and bring them to class in the afternoon, where we would discuss them.

One group had lunch inside an ambulance; another group, in the middle of *Ticinese* roundabout, all places where, according to them, it does not seem "natural" to eat. Others took their meal inside a shop window, as if they were in an exhibition, because "a shop window is usually a static place, where static objects are shown", and thus, they reported, "we wanted to subvert that, subverting also the dichotomy between public and private that it conveys". Others ate in the middle of the street where road works were going on, sitting down around a cavity on the pavement. And some had eaten inside the *Cimiterio Monumentale*. The latter group reported that they were surprised to find people who work and eat there as a routine, and so they realized that it was not such a strange place to eat after-all. They also conducted an interview with the people they found who were restoring the cemetery (it is an historic/heritage cemetery).

The emphasis was on decontextualization, expressed in the idea of 'eating out of place', which was the aim of the exercise. So, for example, they reported that while they were eating they even put music on to break with the dreary silence. Overall, they tried to subvert the ordinary context that surrounds eating, in a conceptual art style, and took some good pictures of it<sup>74</sup>, making a different use of the concept of observation that I had told them about, which by definition implies a relationship.

What struck me was the absence of relationships, either with people or rather simply with the places. The pictures were very appealing, but apart from the group in the cemetery who actually engaged with those whom they found, there were no people beside themselves. Observation is surely not reduced to people and it is my conviction that the interaction with the physical spaces can also be observational in that regard. However, I noticed that the students were not focused on the *interaction* with the places, but were involved in a different process: they were more focused on describing their own experience and sensations, reporting what was the feeling, physically and emotionally, of eating in unexpected places – which they all described

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74 The recontextualizing of objects and the use of the readymade, once widely used by Dadaists and conceptual artists, is now a resource in conceptual design: an existing typology of an object is given new functions; another one is the appropriation of the familiar objects into new uses, new functions, or inserted into new stories (Ferreira 2010).

a feeling of strangeness. In that sense, they performed the decontextualization of the experience, playing with the idea that they were eating in a situation that contrasts with the 'normality' and for that reason, they were 'out of place'. In that sense, they were 'observing' what eating is not, so it was an exercise in negative observation. The unexpectedness, though, was not something generated through the process of the relationship (in this case, with space), but rather the idea about what is 'unexpected' (what eating is not) is given in advance: finding places where it is not normal to eat, thus only reinforcing previous notions about 'normality' or previous notions about what eating 'normally' is.

The characteristics of the places surely influenced their experiences, but on the level of subjectivity – the experience becomes internalized. In this sense, they were playing with the unexpectedness, trying to show an interaction with spaces, but the *interaction* was absent somehow when they report it. They do not look at the places or contexts that they find as *active*: the only *active* element they consider in the relationship are themselves. So I learned that in this process, they were interested in a different movement than the one I expected: they were internalizing the 'outside'.

Another example that also reveals this process of 'internalization' in creativity is concerned with the use of performative pedagogies, largely fostered throughout this course. In one of those lessons we had invited a guest psychoanalyst who was going to facilitate an exercise to increase our body perception, because according to Vardit, eating is also an act of perception of the body. He had a book called "Thinking with the Body". Firstly, he asked each of us to make a drawing of a still life. Then we did this body exercise: sitting still and silent, with our eyes closed, our backs in contact with another person's back, feeling the other person's body and feeling our body inside, until the point of visualizing our internal organs, our lungs, etc., and "*as if* holding those organs in our hands". He was giving us instructions of a hypnotic kind - "now you are feeling this, now you are inside your lungs, now you can see that..." - a kind of an imaginary journey into our insides. Another thing that I learned about Vardit is how she considers herself to have mystical capacities. She commented afterwards that some people are perhaps more sensitive than others, but she can really 'see' those organs and really feels them as if holding them in her hands.

Then we made the same drawing a second time and compared the result. The second drawing was supposed to be "more visceral, more simple and essential", and also "more creative", because in the first one, the expert explained, "our tendency is to draw the classic image of a still life that we have in mind, so it is usually also a more technical and more detailed kind of drawing", whereas the second one, as he showed through our examples, "usually reveal a more uninhibited use of the space because it is more derived from the physical experience, more fluid, more organic". The importance of this exercise, according to Vardit, is that the first stage of the design project, which is the conceptual, brainstorming stage, will be "much freer if we suspend ourselves from our rational, analytical condition" - thus "we will be more creative because we will be freer of prejudices". This is important also for creating a work atmosphere, she suggested, "stimulating instinctivity and clarity of orientation, like the example of Apple". "Often, we start from a concept instead of starting from the conscience of a physical sensation, which is a different thing", Vardit said, and "there are people who adapt sensation to form, instead of form to sensation..." that is why the exercise is "a proposal of a different kind of conscience", that appeals to "visceral states". Though I did not see any difference in mine (mine showed actually the opposite), others were very convincing.

What Vardit was highlighting through this exercise was a proposal to start from feeling: the idea is that feeling comes before knowing – and in that sense, it poses the priority of body and sensation over reason. In regard to food, Vardit considers the 'thinking with the body' exercise important to bring back the experiential relationship associated with the eating sensation, something that is often despised by designers. Thus, the body is understood as a better access to the 'mind', training forethought as a way of improving the 'conceptual' process. In other words, the body is used as an instrument of internalization, a kind of interface between the inside and the outside. So here, there is no dissolution of Cartesian dualisms associated to the use of 'embodied practice', what actually exists is the use of 'embodied practice' and 'embodied learning' for reproducing these dualisms in new ways.

Another example of where this idea of 'training the body' was used as a way of improving the conceptual process provides a clearer insight. In order to stimulate students' conceptual capacity, Vardit brought to the lesson one ex-student, Emma, to show her recent work: a video-performance. The session organized to watch this

video-performance and listen Emma talking about it was itself a kind of performance, in the sense of dramatization – the room had been prepared, and it was in a dim light; we had been asked to bring our own cushions and sit in a circle, on the floor. The session started with a talk where Emma described her trajectory, and continued with Vardit talking about the idea of “looking at ourselves first instead of looking at others”, stressing its importance in design.

Emma had been a student of fashion design who decided, in her final thesis, to deconstruct what it means to dress up - the video had been her thesis. She discovered that “dressing up is always an external thing, concerned with aesthetics”. So she became more interested in searching for a way of “dressing up the interior, dressing up the body *inside*, in dressing *beyond the appearances*”. The supervisor of this work was also present, describing the work that we were going to watch as “research about the act of eating”, “a trajectory which is very personal and it is much more art than design, however, it is important for design as research” – by research, they do not mean academic research, but rather they refer to this inner process of artistic and conceptual exploration, a very personal journey. Emma said that for her ‘research’ her “logbook”, as she called it, had been quite important, and this contained testimonies of her personal trajectory (she used the word “evolution”). She describes her trajectory as a process of “finding the real essence, an *internal* process of understanding what eating is”. So in her discourse, she associates the idea of aesthetics with appearance, with exteriority, in opposition to some kind of “interiority” or inner-self, placing aesthetics in contrast with essence – which again reinforces the reproduction of a Cartesian dualism in favor of the ‘interior’.

She explains that the material she found to best express her idea was jelly, due to its properties of being simultaneously liquid but also because it acquires a solid shape when it comes into contact with air. Her idea for the performance was to dress organs with jelly and eat them, “like the act of drinking water every day, for purification”. She describes this trajectory as a purification act. Her supervisor framed her work as an exploration of the body: the idea that we now live in a historical time where the concept of body is individual, whereas in other times it had been social, collective. She suggested that her work pointed out the possibility of *communicating* with the collective, and the idea of “integrating the other”. Emma, by her turn, stressed “the importance of looking at ourselves first” that Vardit had raised as a way of “observing ourselves in the process of designing, before we turn to

observing others”. I was intrigued by this idea because this seemed contradictory to everything that had been proposed so far, including the ‘observation’ exercises, participant observation in particular: while these exercises propose to observe others and to take a context in consideration, the idea of ‘looking at ourselves first’ that was being promoted, in contrast, seemed to suggest and encourage an inner trajectory of exploring artistic subjectivity. So I asked her if this was not a contradiction of what her professor was talking about as she seemed to be reinforcing an idea of subjectivity, interiority. So was not she closed to the possibility of communicating *with* the others? She replied that that was not the case, because when she communicates, she does not communicate with herself, but always *to* someone, always with the idea of others in mind, so it is definitely not meant to be closed. As Leach remarks regarding the distinctions between how the subject matters of art and science are conceived, “The art-knowledge-object may speak to others (via interpretation), but that comes about initially through subjectivity (internal creativity), with communication as a secondary aspect of intersubjectivity” (2011: 158). However, he notes, “saying that art is about intersubjectivity (...) means that the informant is already thinking of art as connected to subjectivity, and therefore objectivity is there in the background somewhere” (ibid: 160).

The short video showed Emma naked, with her body covered with red jelly, squatting, cowering, and eating the jelly voraciously. After having eaten it all until she was clean, a sentence of text appears saying "And she lived happily ever after". The reactions to the video showed not only the extent to which it was visually and psychologically disturbing – some students remarked that they interpreted it as an act of autophagy – but also the contradiction with the previous observation exercise suddenly emerged, and so the question of ‘communication’ that I raised was, in fact, still open, unresolved. For example, Rufino's reaction was that he could not see in the film anything of the process that we had been talking about – the idea of finding an essence which is common, universal; he said it rather seemed to him that “it communicates a very subjective experience – perhaps a personal thing – as if there’s nothing else to communicate beyond that subjectivity”: "what I see there is an image of autophagy", he concluded. Some people in the room immediately followed his lead, stating that they experienced the same problems with the piece. The tension that was opened up in the room was around the idea of communication: if the

communication of the design ‘research’ is an inter-subjective experience or rather an artistic (inside) self to an outside world.

This problem with the idea of ‘communication’ exposes an unresolved contradiction that was happening: the movement between internalizing the ‘outside’ and then externalizing the ‘inside’. Emma, a little bit upset and visibly disappointed when realizing that her work-of-art had been misunderstood, emphasized that the intention was not to portray an act of autophagy. She clarified that the video was the transformation of a personal and very negative experience into learning, into something internal, an inner process of "evolution". She was referring to her experience in the Netherlands, where, when on an Erasmus year, she had been a victim of racism, however did not detail this history. "For me it was my way of finding the beautiful thing about the act of eating, it couldn't be more beautiful". The problem for Emma was then how to *externalize* what had been so *internalized*, the experience of communicating a very personal trajectory and the misunderstandings that this communication generates. Later, in the break, I observed a debate that was going on outside. A group of girls were talking about the video, which they interpreted as a metaphorical language of renaissance. To them, it was as if she was feeding herself from her own placenta, so they interpreted it as a kind of catharsis, a way of transforming difficulties and external problems into learning and interior virtue, something which seemed to do more justice to Emma’s own intentions.

Both in the previous exercise and this one, the emphasis was on ‘observation’ as a bodily experience and using the body as a resource – through the senses, etc. – though not necessarily the same as an ‘embodied practice’ because embodied practice is based on the dissolution between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ whereas what was being played out here was actually the reinforcement of that difference, therefore the problem of incommunicability. What becomes clear through this example is that the emphasis on ‘observation’ consists of using the body for improving creativity as a process of internalization. So when Vardit talked about starting from the body and from sensation for ‘stimulating instinctivity’ and therefore improving the conceptual process, she was reinforcing a notion of creation that is based on internalization, that is, reproducing the assumption that creativity is a process of internalization and can only be attributed to individual minds (Leach 2003: 15, quoted in Gunn 2009: 3). The body is thus used for a better ‘internalization’ process rather than dissolving the dualism between interior and exterior, which is what the concept of ‘embodied

practice' presupposes. The body, in this conception, is better understood as an interface between 'in' and 'out' rather than a way of dissolving those same dichotomies. This is something that became even more evident through the participant-observation exercise and the use of fieldwork diaries that I will describe next.

## **'Participant observation' and fieldwork diaries**

The week after the picnic exercise the students were asked to do their "participant observation" exercise with someone they knew and bring in their "fieldwork diaries" for interpretation. Vardit stressed very clearly that "one does not start from the project, what is important is to do this research pathway", which is the opposite not only of modernist design, as well as conceptual design, where the concept rules the process, while its execution comes afterwards and where a planned, rational model action is privileged (see Suchman 1987). We visited each student at a time, listening to what they had to tell us about someone with whom they spent some time observing.

One of the students introduced the case of a man from Pescara, who lives in Milan for work purposes. He is lactose intolerant, "which is dramatic because he loves dairy, so he has to drink rice milk, soy milk, instead of milk." He is also gay. According to the student, he is a very particular person, and sees these two aspects of his life as two enormous limitations – for example, he told the student that his cousin who is hosting him in the city does not know he is gay. The student believes that these two 'limitations' come together in his biography – the day he discovered this intolerance was the day he also fell in love with a certain person. So she *composed* her fieldwork diary around the way this person eats, what he eats and why. Vardit offers some possibilities of interpretation: for example, she sees in this narrative some contradictory ideas such as hidden/exposed, or hidden/prohibited, which is something she feels would be interesting to explore – "how can we *transmit* this contradiction through an object? How can we create *an expression* of this non-acceptance?" She also points out the discourse of being different through food: from the moment that this difference is not hidden anymore but it is shared, it becomes a

different kind of experience of difference. We ponder these ideas whilst moving on to another table.

We turned to a student who analyzed her mother's friend who lives in the periphery of Milan. The student organized a dinner and snacks to see what her habits were and the things she likes. She made a diary with photographs attached, because she was fascinated by her surroundings, in particular her "obsession for kitsch craft stuffs". In Vardit's view, design can also be an ironic look at useless things and therefore she suggests the student to reflect upon this lady's relationship with herself, taking food as a mediator. Apparently the woman in question seemed very committed to environmental causes, so Vardit says, "she may be someone that needs help in giving attention to herself". "Try to think about which *gift* you could give her", Vardit suggests. "A form or a function?" the student asks. Either, Vardit answers, "even form can be a reflection on function", and as an example she mentioned an artistic work that was at that the time being exhibited in Venice's Biennale: a fully laid table split in half<sup>75</sup>.

Although the method is encouraged to be open and intuitive, the fact that objects are understood as "gifts" developed by the designer for the person each student is observing suggests a relationship that is based on a movement from inside design/creativity to an outside world – of people, object-users. Being conceived as 'gifts' they depend more on the designers' intentions – what they think is good for the person– rather than from the *interaction* with the person in question; in that sense, the design object is not the result of a collaborative process, or it is only collaborative in a selective way. They do not let the idea of 'practice' influence the design project; or in other words, 'practice' is not used here to dissolve a dualism between mind and body, subject and object, but rather to reinforce it in a way that keeps the internalization of the creative process intact. The agency that the object will index is still designers' agency. Through the idea of 'gift production', a relationship is enacted but the distance is kept between the potential designer as an expert, and the person for whom the object or solution is developed – a division between experts and lay people.

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<sup>75</sup> This installation *Table for Bergman*, 2009, by Elmgreen & Dragset, was part of the Danish and the Northern Pavilions exhibition "The Collectors", curated by the same artists. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/claudiacsandor/3900167707/> (accessed 04/02/2012).

‘Learning by doing’, in that regard, assumes a performative role rather than an epistemological one. The process is dramatized as open and explorative – because it does not depart from previous plans but it is constructed along the way, and also because designers actually engage with people – but it is not *interactive* in the tacit-knowledge/embodied sense because agency is neither attributed to the people they engage with, or to a relationship with them. Some evidence of this performativity of openness is the way field diaries are used: in this exercise they were used as visual representation, rather than part of an ongoing research process. I started noticing that they seem to interpret the fieldwork diary as a way of showing that they did the assignment, and a way of conveying the information they got. However, the fieldwork diary was not something that was part of the observation process, but rather an a-posteriori construction.

We look at these diaries without reading them. To my surprise, everyone followed the model of the illustrated (and illustrative) diary. They used the "field diary" as a collection of evidence and means to communicate the process and the concept, as if substituting the role of booklets in design projects (Chapter 2). These diaries become more like expressions of an ‘outside’ in an already processed form by an ‘inside’ process of creativity. For example, the text in one of the fieldwork diaries was written in the first person: "My name is Júlia Fontes<sup>76</sup> and I'm Brazilian (...)", as if it was a transcription or if it was the observee herself reciting her own biography. Furthermore, the majority of students took a lot of care with the visual side of it, showing much more effort on the form rather than the content. For example, they attached pictures and some of them made the notebook themselves using a particularly nice kind of card and paper, etc. Additionally, they used the diary as a collection of different materials: it was where they put the interviews, the pictures, receipts from shopping, one even had a scheme of the daily menu, and then they literally mixed it up visually. For instance, Bianca showed us her diary about a man who lost his job because the company where he worked went bankrupt. She told us how he does everything very quickly, how he eats very fast. The notebook was used as a way of depicting and portraying information about this person, showing us that he does not have breakfast because he says he does not have time; or alerting us that he consumes a lot of salt, etc; it even included a receipt from the supermarket.

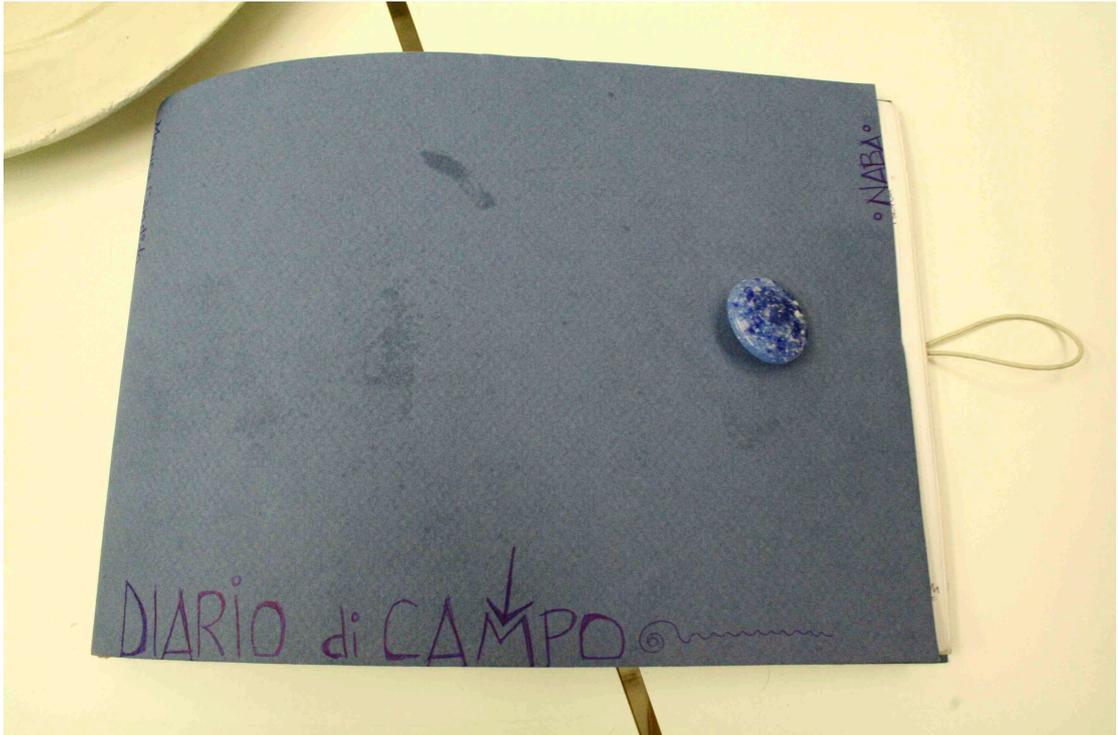
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<sup>76</sup> Fictitious name.

Bianca made the book herself: it was made of blue card, the sheets were cut purposely, and it closed with an elastic attaching to a little knob. It appeared to be a decent piece of craftsmanship.



Figure 26: an example of a fieldwork diary made by a student.



**Figure 27:** the cover of the hand-made fieldwork diary.

Most of them wrote their diaries by hand, but this was clearly something that was done afterwards. There were diaries which were carefully composed, written by computer and printed, with pictures inserted in the text. Some were more photographic than textual: there was a photographic diary depicting a man who lives alone and does not cook very often. The information in these diaries is visually displayed: one was full of pictures with multiple arrows to their labels. Some diaries had a separated part at the end of each day for "observations" or "observation" – this is because observation in Italian also means thoughts, or considerations, and thus, some of them interpreted "observation" as the general considerations or personal conclusions from a situation.

The notebook is itself a visual, material object in which they invest a lot of effort – Vardit commented that they were "very beautiful diaries". The fact that they cared so much about the visual presentation of their notebooks is perhaps closer to the specificities of the sketchbook genre and its greater centrality to the artistic practice than to fieldwork diaries within anthropology, which are predominantly more textual. Wendy Gunn makes the point that the sketchbook is a specific institutional mode of learning within the arts and architectural fields of practice (2009a: 107). She identifies a synthesis of word and image within fine art students'

sketchbooks, where drawing and imaging and writing are combined. Despite the differences between notebooks and sketchbooks – that are concerned with the verbal and non-verbal relations surrounding these genres’ specific systems of representation, systems of notation – in Gunn’s account, both are places for exploration (ibid: 116), they are ways of collecting materials but also tools for thinking (Gunn 2009b: 5). Just like ethnographic field notes, sketching, she argues, is a way of remembering or a way of practically engaging with ideas (2009a: 118-119). Writings and drawings both in sketchbooks and fieldwork diaries are a trace, “a form of inscription and as such are not meant as a description *of or about* a finished object; rather they are essential for a process of describing a thing being made” (2009a: 117). What is common to anthropologists, architects and artists notebooks is that the acts of drawing (in the widest sense of a socially embedded practice of inscription) are integral to the making process (2009b: 22-23), they are ways of *practice*, where an emphasis is put on relation rather than content (ibid: 26).

It was that kind of ‘practice’ that I found absent here. The diaries that I observed are not used as part of the ‘fieldwork’ process, but as instruments of visual communication, and therefore, of the enactment of the process as an ‘open’ and collaborative one. The concept of the fieldwork diary is thus completely reframed, which was for me an unexpected appropriation. My surprise however, was not simply concerned with the fact that the fieldwork diary turned into visual object/visual media, but rather that it was not part of doing the research: it was prepared as a representation of what they refer to afterwards. These notebooks, in this regard, are not active things – in the sense of ‘tools to think with’ that Gunn describes (2009b: 5) – rather, they are a way of working *about*, representing, instead of working through/with. In other words, these diaries are less part of doing than they are *representations* of action, but with a very special nuance: they simulate action; they simulate the openness of the process in a way that it becomes an aesthetic effect. The aspect that surprised me most was the fact that they simulated visually the craft and improvised character of a spontaneous notebook: the spontaneity and improvisation becomes a visual style that is part of the representation about action.

While totally constructed, the diary is paradoxically used as visual evidence, as a way of showing the process and communicating it. The students were looking for ‘real’ situations and problems so that they could find a solution for it or just express it artistically, and thus the diary is a way of showing it, a way of

communicating the realism of their exercises: a way of showing that ‘needs’ are out there, as something external. In this sense, the diaries reveal that they interpreted "observation" as seeing – observing as a particularly visual, objective perception that is more concerned with an outside rather than an inside, in the sense of an ‘objectivity that is there in the background somewhere’ that Leach talks about (2011: 160) as the necessary reverse of artistic subjectivity that artists claim when making distinctions between art and science. The diary as ‘representation’ sets up a distinction between ‘observation’ as an external thing in relationship to the internalization of the creative process. In the end, ideas as the result of a process of internalization are more valued than the relational character of the interaction, which reproduces the normative hierarchy that practical approaches to knowledge put in question. ‘Learning by doing’ is thus less a way of working beyond a Cartesian tradition, rather it is a way of reinforcing it, although reversing its terms.

‘Practical knowledge’ (and by extension, ‘participant observation’) is thus used somehow instrumentally. It reveals that designers are not interested in practical knowledge for their embodied and tacit aspects, but they are quite interested in the performativity of it. The cultivation of an idea of openness, improvisation and unpredictability of the process is there, it is enacted as such: it becomes a matter of communication, an aesthetic effect, a way of producing images of the process as an open one.

## **Objects as gifts: hesitating between description and innovation**

(Creative) agency in ethnography is placed in a rather different place than in design. ‘Agency’ in ethnography is not located in subjects (minds) or in objects (the world) but rather in the relationship between both. The relational character of the ethnographic interaction and the dissolution between subjectivity and objectivity is precisely what is considered generative within ethnography. Influenced by phenomenology, ethnography is all-relational and relationships are by definition open, they refer to processes of becoming rather than beings or things out there in the world. But this is not how it is seen within design collaborations, where often a view

of ethnographic work as purely empirical dominates. Ethnography is viewed by designers as “a process of going out and finding facts lying around in the world, dusting them off, and bringing them home to inform, educate and delight” (Dourish & Bell 2011: 66). This perception often reduces ethnography within design collaborations to the place of a service relationship: ethnography is usually used to inform design for systems development, a way of collecting and organizing data (ibid).

As I engaged in a context where design is not solution-oriented, the perception designers had of me and my role as an ethnographer was rather ambiguous, somehow framed by this perception of the instrumental use of ethnography as a method for ‘studying users’ on the one hand, but an instrumental use that they do not need because they do not ‘study users’ on the other hand. Therefore, often they did not know how to use my knowledge; they did not know what to do with the sort of collaboration that was available to them.

Reduced to a “toolbox of methods for extracting data from settings” (ibid: 68), ethnography is not seen as *creative* (and therefore, nor potentially innovative) but rather as descriptive: the ethnographer is seen as “a channel for the relatively straightforward movement of data from the field to the studio” (ibid: 70). It was these perceptions that framed the relationships with my informants, which are evident from the deployments of ‘observation’ that I detail. They were exploring how, as an ethnographer, I could be useful to them.

One week later in the next class the students had already put into material form their proposals: they were developing objects for each of the people they had been observing and started showing their prototypes. Noticing how the students’ objects were taking form, I wondered in what way the notion of ‘participant observation’ influenced their conception of their creations. How were the observation processes they went through integrated in their objects? How can the creative process grow from an observational interactive relationship?

Although Vardit is not against transforming specific ideas into general industrial projects, in this exercise she prevented students going too fast into thinking about industrial production (standard general ideas) without paying attention to a specific situation and work accordingly, because “they are more used to thinking the other way around”, she contends. Thus, some students who tried to develop more rational solutions according to an industrial design/problem-solving approach were

discouraged from following that path. This was the case of Valentina, a student who in previous class explained she had been sick, and so she decided to make the observation exercise about her own experience. She had fever and for a whole week she had a diet of just lemon tea. She "observed" that when one is sick any simple movement to pick up a drink or food can be a struggle, especially if one sleeps in a bunk bed like she does. Based on her experience, she wanted to develop a practical solution to facilitate the access of food and drinks to sick people lying in bed. So she thought about developing a set: a system that allows for making all the operations (of getting food and drink, taking medicines) at once, including for example a warm water bottle to use several times a day. In the previous session, when she mentioned the idea, Ascanio had suggested to her the system used in the drive-in, which allows you to put just one hand out the window to take the things you wish to eat. Valentina thought this was a good idea (given that she sleeps in the upper bed of the bunk) and hence she decided to work around this concept: she had developed a carrier with a pulley which can be put on the table with a base to hold the hot water bottle and other food supports.

Nobody questioned the fact that this was an exercise of self-observation, as she had already explained the reasons why she did it in such a way. But there was a different issue at stake: Vardit commented with disapproval that "it is an object which is already considering an industrial series production" – that is, thinking about someone in the same situation, standardizing. However, "it can become a real object, in the sense that it should be an object just for yourself", because "we are analyzing very specific situations", Vardit adds, suggesting for her to think about an object specifically for her situation. So she suggests her to work upon something that she already has at home, and make an intervention on it, as a way of 'making it more specific'. The question of observation, thus, was understood as a process of moving from the general to the specific – but still, the relational aspect is missing.

Another example of this point was that of the student who worked with a girl from Brazil, who eats alone and chats online whilst her food cools. The student presented a specific fabric for keeping the food warm, almost a blanket. Vardit noticed that the students were thinking about the situations they observed as individual examples of generalizable problems, and thus they went for the usual 'problem-solving' industrial design approach – but that was not what she wanted from the exercise. The challenge of this part of the exercise, she stressed, was to

design for a specific person or situation. Thus, she suggested to her to rather think about the idea of warmness – how can we recreate the warmness that she misses from Brazil? The student stated that she thought that the exercise was about designing something that would suit everyone, but in reality she realized that it is a more artistic thing. According to Vardit, “it's not quite that, the thing is that this stage of the exercise is intended to be as open as possible to allow for exploration”.

Another example: Bianca had built a structure, made of card, for preparing everything for breakfast, with a place to put the newspaper, another for the cereals, etc. According to Vardit, it is not an object for extreme situations, it does not communicate a final idea, and moreover, it is an object that is alien to the environment/context in which it is supposed to be placed – it could be for *any breakfast situation in general*. Thus, she suggests her to look for a better link between the thing and the context: it should be an object conceived for *the specific* situation she had found.

However, the question of the general/specific was leaving the transformational potential of the relationship intact. By this time, I wondered about the observees' reactions. The projects were being done as if they were a surprise for them, as gifts conceived especially for them, as design *for*, rather than *with*, or simply *influenced by*. Despite Vardit's emphasis on designing an object for each specific situation, the relationship of creation is one where the designer develops something without the interference of the person studied, as if those persons did not play any role in the interaction, apart from one of recipients (Gell 1998) of the creation. What I am saying is not that a direct participation from these persons was supposed or required: the point is that the relationships here are ones where the 'other', despite being seen as 'specific', is not seen as active. The act of creation was not understood as a movement, or 'growing' in Ingold's terms (2000), or a continuity between mind and body, but rather as a process from external input information (the 'observation') to internal conceptual creativity, and then external again, as an object-gift-creation. Thus, although they go through a process of observation, that is a form of practice and 'learning-by-doing', and even getting to the 'specific' – what is performed through this 'learning-by-doing' exercise is thus a discontinuity between conceptuality (mind) and observees-as-gift-receivers (materiality/body). It is thus a modernist idea of conception that is reproduced, with the only difference being that instead of being standardized, it is for just one individual person. The creation

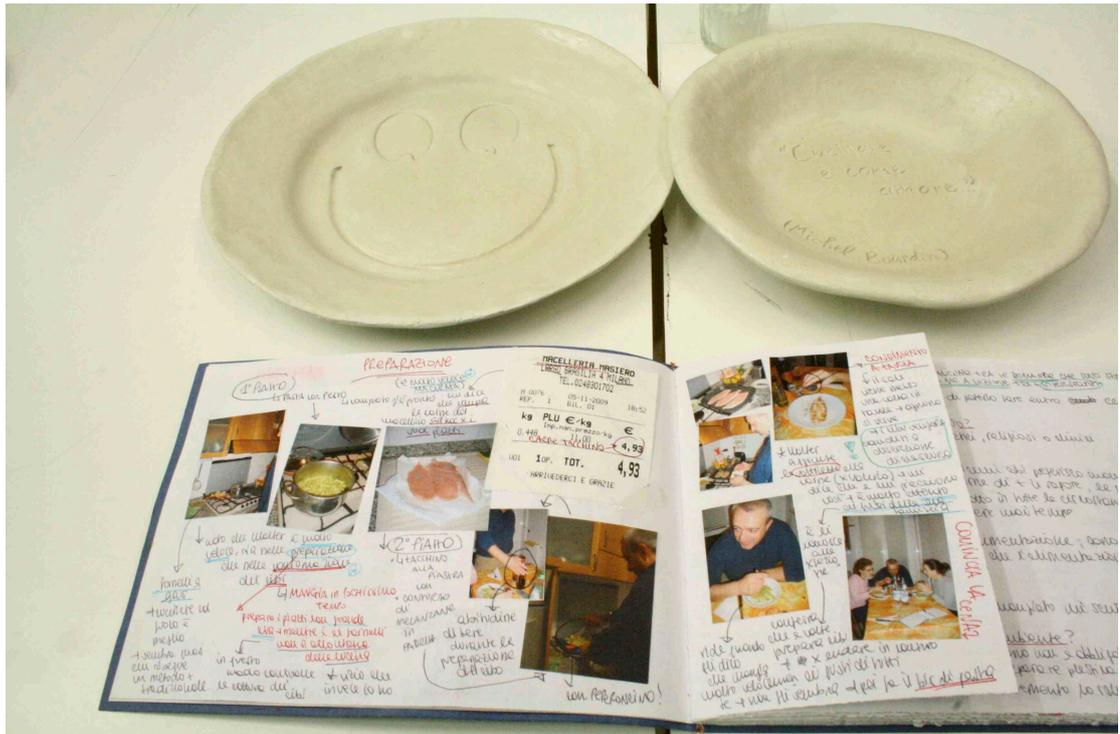
process, however, remains unchanged – a notion that I will continue with in the next chapter. That is why I wondered what the reactions of the observees would be to those objects. This is not to say, however, that design relationships should be different – perhaps the idea of ‘developing something for someone’ is what very basically defines design; what I am interested in is taking that as an opportunity to understand something about how ‘learning-by-doing’ is performed.

This is not to deny that there were not relationships involved either. Some of these projects actually evolved explicitly as a relationship: for the subject that was lactose intolerant, the student made a video instead of an object called "*Il pollo di Ivan*" (Ivan's chicken). This idea was because Ivan had started to eat chicken more often since he discovered his intolerance (because he cannot eat cheese) but he usually cooks it always the same way – roasted in the oven. The video showed in a humorous manner how to prepare chicken with a special recipe, *Pollo al limone* (chicken with lemon), that does not involve any dairy ingredient, with a song - "*Ma che bontà*" - by Mina (a vintage famous Italian singer) playing in the background. Vardit suggested that the student should see how he reacts to the video, and that her project may develop *as a relationship*. However, as this case showed, it is a relationship in the sense of gift-giver to gift-receiver: a movement from inside (subjective conception) to outside (objective reception). What I am highlighting is the asymmetry of the relationship, where the people they work with, likewise with the notebooks they use as field-diaries, or indeed the space and the environment, are not seen as active in the creative process.

One of the students created ceramic dishes that as one continues eating and it gets emptier, the food that remains would form a pattern: a smiling face, for example, or a written message will emerge, as the design had been carved in *intaglio*. She made a prototype version with a smile<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> This was considered a good example. However, I find it difficult to see the difference between this object and the humorous objects of, for example, Philip Stark, whom Vardit referred to at the beginning of the course as being superfluous.



**Figure 28:** an example of a fieldwork diary and the respective object produced: ceramic dishes with an *intaglio* pattern.

Though it is quite clever, it is the kind of object where we do not see anymore the relationship with the subject for which it was created. However, in this case – as generally in the case of all of these projects – if there was not that relationship, despite its asymmetry, the same idea would never have emerged. This is the point, after-all, of practical learning – however, that is not consciously recognized. Vardit wanted the objects to be explicitly developed for the persons they had worked with, and this was not the case. However, because the idea proposed was creative, and it was new, she hesitated – the idea was very well received, everyone found it funny and original. However, the question of whether the objects should be developed literally as interpretations for specific situations, or if they should be something else, remained open.

This problem emerged in an explicit way in a discussion at lunch time in the school's bar when Ascanio, talking about the impressions on this session, raised a very poignant question: "Using this observation method to resolve the problem of someone in specific, one runs the risk of often arriving to a solution that already exists – we may come to the conclusion that in a specific case, what a certain person really needs is a table, or chair, or something like that, so what is the point? What

does this (referring to the ‘participant-observation’ method) add that is new?" he asks, "if, at the end of the day, what comes out of this process should be something innovative?" The contradiction that Ascanio raises – which is in fact another version of Osvaldo’s idea that ‘if we would only give users what they want, we would still live in caves’, corresponds to an ubiquitous dilemma in design: the dilemma between description and innovation; which is another version of the dilemma between needs and desires, and the dilemma between choosing a design-centered approach or a user-centered approach to the design process. Ascanio’s dilemma, in this case, was also between being ‘too conceptual and artistic’ (following designers’ desires or projections) – or ‘too observational’ (following needs, the *specific* situations), that risks producing conservative outputs rather than innovative ones. The main problem, though, is with their notion of ‘observation’ – and indeed, their notion of ‘practice’ (or the absence of it), for they contrast the use of observation as a faithful description of reality with innovation as a way of going beyond the existing reality and bringing the new into being. The question is: are they separated? Are innovation and creativity disembodied practices, abstract, out of context, things of the mind? If so, how does the new or the unexpected come into being?

## **Conclusion: ‘learning by doing’ as performance**

Often in theoretical debates the tacit is inserted as a category outside language. For example, Maurice Bloch (1992) suggests that everyday thought is not ‘language-like’. He refers to an approach in cognitivism known as connectionism: “the idea that most knowledge, especially the knowledge involved in everyday practice, does not take a linear, logic-sentential form but rather is organized into highly complex and integrated networks or mental models most elements of which are connected to each other in a great variety of ways” (ibid.: 130).

The problem with practical approaches to learning in theoretical debates is the sharp distinction they establish between models for actions and actions, reason and practice (conception and making, mind and body), and the preference for the latter over the former. It is my contention that theorists of practical knowledge are often entrapped in the purification exercises that they themselves so vigorously fight

against. For instance, the contrast between the normative theory and the situated approach, metaphorized extensively through the European and Trukese navigation by 'practice theory' cognitivists (Suchman 1994 (1987); Ingold 2000; Gell 1985; Pálsson 1994: 906; Hutchins 1995) is like the negative side of the purification it criticizes<sup>78</sup>: it sets a sharp contrast between the "abstract, textual logics" of European Navigation in contrast to the "situated, intuitive procedures of Trukese navigators" (Pálsson 1994: 906). Pálsson remarks that "(F)ew people actually operate in everyday life in the idealized manner described for the European navigator and the 'rational' Alaskan skipper, and those who do, are unlikely to do so on a regular basis. Many people act, much of the time, on the basis of intuitive knowledge and body dispositions – 'tacit' knowledge (Polanyi 1958) or *techne* (Marglin 1990)" (Pálsson 1994: 907). If we take that proposition as true, we also have to consider that a few people actually operate in the equally idealized manner of intuitive, tacit knowledge: the contrast is itself theoretical. There is no pure way of acting and plans are also part of the contingency of the journey (Suchman 1987).

Thus, when these theories propose to move away from language, they are moving away from a particular conception of language, which is language as representation rather than practice. However, if we consider that language is not a mirror of the world (Wittgenstein 2009 (1953)), but language is also performative (Austin 1962), then we must admit that representations have effects (what actors think, the way they represent the world) and that beliefs have a creative role. Thus, what I think it is important to look at – and what I have been attempting to show – is actors' particular involvement with ideas of 'embodied learning' and 'practice' as itself a particular kind of performance: in other words, the important thing here was not showing ethnographically that 'knowledge is a form of practice' from advance (with the assumption already that practice precedes theory, or that embodiment is more important than concepts and minds, etc.), but rather looking at what ideas of 'knowledge as practice' are used for. Therefore, my concerns have been with shifting the approach from 'what knowing is' to 'what conceptions of knowing' are used for.

It is from this perspective that I have accounted for how 'learning by doing' in a design school in Milan serves to reinforce a modernist conception of knowledge

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<sup>78</sup> Latour and Yaneva (2008: 84) make a similar critique about phenomenologists: "If phenomenology may be praised for resisting the temptation to reduce humans to objects, it should be firmly condemned for not resisting the much stronger and much more damning temptation to reduce materiality to objectivity".

where ‘practice’ is the opposite of ‘theory’. Paradoxical as it may sound, ‘learning by doing’, in this particular context, is a way of making design more conceptual. Thus, I described how exercises of embodied knowledge, such as participant observation, were used as a way of ‘training minds’ (by fostering improvisation and forethought) for producing better conceptual results, where creativity was performed as a subjective, internalized individual process (the idea of creating objects as gifts), centered on the designer’s creative mind. I have showed how a “hands-on”, “learning by doing” philosophy is used as a resource, but it is used performatively: it is more a matter of language, of words doing things: the idea that utterances do not just describe the state of things, but produce them (Austin 1962). Embodied exercises are used as a way of reversing the dichotomy between theory and practice, a subversion of what ‘practice theorists’ do with their emphasis on ‘practice’ and ‘embodied skills’ – a way of putting practice over theory, however in the end, ideas and the separation of the creative process from the ‘outside’ are unaffected by any phenomenological sources of ‘practice’. In other words, ‘practice’ is used as a performative device rather than an epistemological one. I have showed how designers are not interested in practical knowledge for their embodied and tacit aspects, but they are rather interested in the performativity of it. This is what I called the ‘dramatization of practice’: practical learning is used to communicate the openness, improvisation and unpredictability of the process which is enacted as such, so the ‘practice’ of learning-by-doing becomes a matter of communication. It is in this sense that I used a practical approach to look at the performativity of an idea of ‘practice’. In doing so my aim was, on the one hand, to draw attention to the need of recognizing the dramatic/performative as part of that which is created within processes of innovation; and on the other hand, drawing attention to the importance of looking at ‘practice’ through the point of view of relationships (cf. Knorr Cetina 2001)<sup>79</sup> rather than starting from prioritizations made beforehand between reason and embodied ‘practices’ or between practice and theory. It is this shift to relationality that invites us to look at what kind of prioritizations do actors in the field make between theory and practice.

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<sup>79</sup> “(...) contemporary accounts (of practice) favor a conception of practice in terms of habits and routines. As a consequence, these authors seek to explain practice (understood as practices) by an appeal to the embodied acquisition of preferences, perceptual schemes and dispositions to react, and by an appeal to shared tacit rules. (...) In contrast, I see epistemic practice as based upon a form of relationship (...) that by the nature of its dynamic transforms itself and the entities formed by the relationship” (Knorr Cetina 2001: 184-185).

In that regard, I have shown that practice is used performatively in the field as a way of saying ‘we do projects, rather than listening to professors’, something that may certainly work as a form of competitiveness in business terms – within what Pálsson identifies as an ongoing tendency to reify practical skills as a marketable commodity (Pálsson 1998: 920), but does not move beyond that: at the end of the process what designers *do* with practical learning is the enactment of a conceptual notion of creativity and innovation. In other words, through ‘learning by doing’ they enact a modern prioritization of theory/mind/concepts/ideas over practice.

Thus, the privilege of practical learning over the theory in visual education, where ‘the School’ is located, is far from being part of a post-Cartesian pedagogy. It rather reproduces essentialized notions, such as the primacy of the visual as an embodied, unreflective, sensorial capacity over thought and critique (the idea that ‘(f)eeeling comes before knowing’ (Gunn 2009: 19), an assumption which is on the basis of the idea of ‘visual literacy’ (Naylor & Ball 2005). The fact that these "(e)mbodied, performative pedagogies lie at the heart of contemporary arts curriculum" (Grushka 2010: 10), is often associated with the idea that visual communication uses a different language and requires specific forms of literacy skills (visual literacy). My argument is that this is a specific way of reproducing a dichotomy between mind and body, reproducing a conception of creativity as internalization and a modern conception of innovation. ‘Learning by doing’ is thus part of a wider trend in new media, which "privileges practice over theory, production over critique, formal over ideological, and visual over verbal" (Hocks & Kendrick 2003: 5).

## 4. Creativity

### Design-driven innovation and the process between analysis and synthesis

Early in my fieldwork, Osvaldo described the designer as someone who is able to produce good metaphors, good fictions.

**Osvaldo:** It's truly like movie making. There are some directors who are able more than others to interpret and to make things that everyone likes. Why so? Well, because they find connectors to the rest of the world. There are other movie-makers who don't have this skill, and then they make movies that you think "hummm, how boring".

**Andrea:** But aren't sometimes projects unsuccessful because of a failure of interpreting what is it that people want, or because sometimes you (the designer) can be doing something that you want, instead of what users want?

**Osvaldo:** Yeah, but then, I don't believe in the writer who writes a masterpiece that no one reads. (Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

The metaphor Osvaldo uses to describe the design 'art' – film-making – suggests the importance of an artistic, authorial mode of action, which is what sustains his vision of design-driven innovation. The approach to innovation processes that prevail in 'the Studio' is based in this authorial mode of action – a mode of action based on the idea of artistic masterpiece, where the designer is the protagonist in the innovation process (while 'users' are absent), an aspect that I explore in the introduction to 'the Studio' when contrasting the two 'design cultures' in regards to the ways they relate to users. In this chapter I explore the extent to which the creative process in design is attached to a specific notion of artistic authorship from where the idea of 'masterpiece' comes from.

The chapter aims to contribute to the anthropological debates about modes of creativity (Leach 2004), extending it to the relationship between creativity and ethnography. James Leach argues that "there is little specific anthropological understanding of the modes in which 'creativity' operates" (ibid: 151); he refers to some characteristics of the Euro-American mode of creativity by comparison to other modes that differ from this one (in Melanesia). He therefore relativizes the Euro-American model of creativity as something which is contingent, showing that

alternate modes exist. Within the Euro-American model, human creativity is primarily intellectual creativity. It exists as abstract thought (as labor of the mind). This construction, he argues, is “an autopoietic mode of generating meaning”, and is part of an economy which constantly sees the need to innovate (ibid: 154)<sup>80</sup>. It is to this (Euro-American) model of creativity that the ethnographic case of this chapter looks into. What this ethnographic case shows, though, is that this mode of creativity is not unified within the Euro-American culture, but rather there are differences between different fields of knowledge that require attention: one of these is the relationship between artistic design and ethnography. The case that I will present is focused on this relationship.

Participating in a creative process as an ethnographer while trying to learn how to be ‘designerly’ creative was important in a reflexive way: it generated reflection about the ethnographic process of knowledge production and creativity (a reflection that I expand in the Conclusion of the thesis), therefore, the chapter is also a contribution to the ongoing debates concerned with the collaborations between design and ethnography (cf. Dourish & Bell 2011; Crabtree & Rodden 2002; Wasson 2002; Suchman 2011; Rabinow & Marcus 2008). I have already accounted how STS ethnomethodology shifts the focus from invention to “an interest in ongoing practices of assembly, demonstration and performance” (Suchman *et al* 2002: 163). This position is paradigmatic of the STS *description of* technical innovation – therefore, the focus on the mundane practices rather than the ‘big ideas’/heroic accounts of invention and design that center on an individual’s biography. However, the question of knowing ‘where does the new come from?’ – epistemologically – the generative potential of ethnography – remains unattended. Expanding the research on what kinds of collaboration between ethnography and design are potentially productive, the ethnographic case presented in this chapter provides an opportunity to explore reflexively the implications of an ethnography of design for understanding the presuppositions embedded into conventional ethnographic practice – a reflection that I will return to at the end of the Conclusion of the thesis.

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<sup>80</sup> Leach takes this analysis further to consider how this mode of creativity is concerned with capitalism and property, namely through intellectual property (IP), as this ‘labour of the mind’ is embodied in material outcomes and these can be owned. (ibid: 154). “The rhetoric of creativity in contemporary Euro-America is driven by commerce, and relies upon property” (ibid: 156).

## The ‘Diffuse Museum’ project

The model of innovation suggested by the idea of ‘masterpiece’ is concerned with an epistemic asymmetry (Maranta *et al*, 2003: 2), a specific and situated way of establishing a *differentiation* between expertise and lay people that is so characteristic of high modernity (Guggenheim 2010). This process has been more visible in science: to Guggenheim, “(a) well-known version of this thesis is Bruno Latour’s book “We Have Never Been Modern” (Latour 1993)”, where he “argues that the modern differentiation between science and the rest of the society rest on an unwarranted but constitutive assumption that science produces objective truths while other forms of knowledge do not” (Latour, quoted in Guggenheim 2010). According to Guggenheim, the “invention of the user” in design and architecture occurred after the 1970’s: prior to that decade, “if users were mentioned, they were presented primarily as passive beings, to be measured by designers to define a “human scale” for architecture. Only in the 1960s do users begin to appear as active beings, capable of changing buildings and challenging architects” (Guggenheim 2011: 3). This was when the differentiation between experts and lay people was put in question as part of the “revolt of the audience” as Jurgen Gerhards has called it (Gerhards 2001, cited in Guggenheim 2010).

“(…) in the case of architecture, the modern *discourse* of producing things claimed that experts – scientists, artists, urban planners, architects and bureaucrats – would arrive at the best available solution to a given problem. The role of lay people would be to adopt, adhere to and cherish these solutions. Artists would produce great artworks that define our times. Scientists would come up with truths about the world, that bureaucrats and engineers would translate into procedures for managing organizations or states or making use of nature. Architects and urban planners would design buildings and cities that would deliver the best solutions to scarce housing and give city dwellers beautiful flats” (ibid, author’s italics).

Guggenheim argues that despite this modern process of differentiation it did not mean that “there were no lay people who made drawings at home”, or adapted their houses according to their own tastes, for example – the point is that modernity rendered those processes invisible. Use was not, and it is still not part of the (high) modernist conception of agency.

One of the experiences in which the division between experts and audience was supposed to be torn down was a prototype for a “new conception of museum”.

‘The Studio’ has an extensive experience of working with exhibition design and Interactive Design for museums – by the time they were involved in a museum for Olivetti, in Ivrea; they also had worked on an important project in Vale della Lucania, in the south of Italy (where they had set up a museum dedicated to the art of embroidery); they have had a collaboration in *Studio Museo Achille Castiglione*, and later they worked for Plart – *Museo della Plastica*, in Naples – all of these were based on client requests – clients who were part of their network of relationships: for example, Olivetti, in Ivrea, had been one of the main sponsors of the Interaction Design Institute in Ivrea that these designers belonged to, and thus it remained an important client. With the economic crisis (in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008) and facing the absence of requests from clients, ‘the Studio’ was investing in the idea of “low-cost” museums, that is, museums without headquarters. They called it *Museo Diffuso* (‘Diffuse Museum’).

The idea is not new – the idea of museums without physical structure was actually developed in the 1970’s in France and Scandinavia through the concept of eco-museum, though eco-museums were meant as not only decentralized in space but mainly in a political sense: in the original conception, they were meant for community participation and self-representation, instruments of empowerment (Gaspar 2001). The idea of “Museo Diffuso” is widely used in Italy usually to designate spread, multi-site museums or museums of territory – there are plenty of examples of *Musei diffusi*, either in rural or in urban contexts (in Rome, in Venice, etc.), although emptied from the political connotations that ‘eco-museums’ had in their origins.

According to Alessandro, the manager of this project, the *Museo Diffuso* is a radically ‘new’ kind of museum without a physical structure but rather based on an online social network. There are no fixed structures. The focus is on immateriality: memory rather than objects; stories, networks, appointments, direct contacts and interviews rather than buildings and exhibitions. In this sense, it is also meant to be an example of an Interaction Design project that fits with their conception of Interaction, which is ‘using technology not as an end in itself’ but as ‘a way of activating relationships between people’. This is concerned with how they imagine the museum of the future - on the one hand, because it is low-cost and as it does not involve physical structures or staff; on the other hand, because it promotes a “more authentic and direct encounter”, “based on emotions rather than formal knowledge”.

One of the examples on which they based themselves was the idea for a Museum of Holocaust in Rome: a museum without physical structure with the people that survived the Holocaust and they would relate their memories, experiences, etc. A similar proposal they made was for the Museum of Porta Palazzo in Turin, also based on ‘memories rather than objects’.

Another reason why the concept of *Museo Diffuso* is ‘new’ is because the visitor is allowed a more active role than in conventional museums as it is the visitor who chooses the information she/he wants and interprets the history of the territory – it is in this sense that the distance between producers and audience/users/consumers is supposed to be torn down.

The concept of ‘Diffuse Museum’ is perhaps closer to the idea of ‘diffuse factory’ than to the concept of multi-site museum or eco-museum. The notion of ‘diffuse factory’ is used by theorists of post-Fordism to refer to de-centered production – the ‘diffuse factory’ refers to the European variant of Toyotism (Lazzarato 1996: 135; Gambino 1996). Post-Fordism, more generally, is referred to as “the networked interaction of *fractal factories* and the ‘immaterial’ economy”: the centered, hierarchical organization is substituted by the paradigm of the a-centric, self-organized network of post-Fordism (Gorz 1999: 46, 53). According to its theorists, the post-industrial economy does not affect only industry, but society as a whole, with its forms of “immaterial production”. The idea of the “diffuse factory” and decentralization of production, according to Lazzarato (1996), is part of the post-industrial transformation of the world of work. The ‘diffuse’ and ‘a-centric’, as well as the idea of networks (Knox *et al.* 2006), more than a descriptor, is a ubiquitous metaphor. The designers of ‘the Studio’ were transporting this idea to the world of museums: they wanted to work on what they consider “a new conception of museum”: they liked the idea that the museum is not a stable and static thing anymore, but rather, as much as with everything else they imagine, it becomes immaterial, it becomes a network. The idea was to have a website where people register for an appointment to meet with people directly in the territory and hear about their memories and testimonies. It becomes a network in a literal sense because it becomes digital, and in a metaphorical one because it becomes de-territorialized and immaterial; it becomes an experience.

By now, we could imagine a direct encounter between a common visitor and the memories/stories in loco, and the visitor making sense of those

memories/stories/testimonies. It is not how it works, though, at least not in the example that I am going to describe, where the stories that count for the concept of museum are not people's stories, but stories that are a result of a creative and authorial process. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this 'new' museum is that *objects* are no more the protagonists of production: *stories* are. These stories, however, do not bridge the gap between producers and users/audience: these should be stories with an author.

The concept of 'diffuse museum' – with all the reasons why it is presented as 'new' – was already prepared, an idea ready to use and "packed" into a booklet (a graphic proposal) with the references (the examples) collected to support the idea. This booklet was activated when they were invited to present their ideas in Lecce, a city in Apulia region, south of Italy. Pietro Pasquale is a designer from Lecce, and it was he who invited 'the Studio' to participate in the program of activities he was organizing there. The plan was to make a prototype of this idea of *Museo Diffuso* in Lecce. Silvana was the designer in charge of making this adaptation. The idea was to use the general concept of Diffuse Museum that they already had and make it specific for Lecce. The prototype they thought about consisted of a workshop in Lecce to produce an exhibition, and finally this exhibition would be presented as a prototype for their idea of 'Diffuse Museum'.

Prototyping, Michael Guggenheim remarks, has always existed, but was not recognized until some point around the 1970's, when it was "invented" as a positive, celebratory discourse. "(P)rototyping is not simply understood as the development of "first forms" or "first strikes" as beta-versions of products as in industrial design, but as a more general mode of doing culture: a mode that is tentative, based on bricolage, user involvement and ongoing change and improvements of products and practices, as 'open innovation', rather than on an expert in a closed lab who turns out a finished product to be used by a unknowing user" (Guggenheim 2010). The 1970s marked this reversal in culture, from modern science and its differentiation between experts and lay people, to a knowledge that is tentative, open to lay participation. Supposedly, this culture indicates a crisis of differentiation between experts and lay people.

What was being prototyped with this experience was a mode of involving 'users', visitors, 'consumers' of history, memory and culture into active 'producers'. It was, in this sense, quite literally a prototype of Interaction Design – in 'the

Studio's' specific conception of using (low-tech) technology to activate relationships between people. It was also, in that sense, a prototype of the post-Fordist de-centered production but adapted to the cultural industry. However, the notion of Interaction starts to unfold as problematic. Associated with the idea of 'reading a place' emerges a tension between creating something *new* or creating something that is a mere representation of the place.

### **The workshop *Tracce di tabacco***

The workshop was run over three days (12-14th of June 2009). I joined the project as a participant – it was the role I could negotiate in order to attend, as I was told that it would not require any specific skills. It took place in a former tobacco factory, currently the site of an architecture studio – Studio Severino – who hosted us for the workshop. Architect Severino and his wife, together with younger architects working in their studio, took charge of the organization of the activities. We had only three days to produce the exhibition, so everything was previously organized – including paradoxically, as I will describe, 'what to experience'. Alessandro, Silvana and Antonia, from 'the Studio' in Milan were there to present the project and coordinate the workshop: it all started with a presentation session at the former *Tabacchificio*.

Tobacco was the topic we were going to work on, which historically had been very important for the economy of the region, the memories of local people and the past life of the building. The building had a succession of uses: it was built in the 1920's as a factory, was later transformed into a farm, and is "now a place of labor and pain, but another kind of pain", mentioned architect Severino, referring to his architecture studio. His mother had worked in a tobacco factory but he had never been in one. When he first saw it, he "had been compelled by the power of the place", he had wanted to transform it into "a factory of arts, of creativity". The 'memory' of the building, he told us, intersects strongly with the history of Lecce as entire families worked there. The family of Laura – an architect in the Studio

Severino – had owned the factory. It had been a private company operating under state license<sup>81</sup> in the period of Italian ‘State capitalism’<sup>82</sup>.

The aim of the workshop was to explore the territory, interpret the place and its “traces” and produce objects that would activate testimonies or stories: it was called “Tracce di Tabaco” (Tobacco Traces). There was an explicit intention to involve ‘people from Lecce’: “The workshop proposes in the first place to activate relational dynamics between the participants (predicted in a maximum of 15 persons selected among graduates and students of Pugliese Universities) with the inhabitants of the place and the testimonies about the time when the tobacco factory was active”<sup>83</sup>. The ‘inhabitants’, however, turned out quite virtual, as I will further explain. The majority of the participants were artists, architects and designers who enrolled in the workshop through Pietro Pasquale’s network. Although these were mostly professional designers, they were people who did not know ‘the Studio’, they were not part of their circle of influence, so they did not have ‘the Studio’s’ ‘inside’ view of design – they rather belonged to Pietro Pasquale’s network, some were personal friends of his.

The participants emphasized as their motivations for being there in the workshop as a kind of escape from the urban environments where they are located to the countryside: most were from the South (Lecce, Naples, Rome), but there were also people from the North, for example, from Venice. Some mentioned that they came there for a new experience (people from a design studio in Pescara, South, Abruzzi region), others mentioned the pleasure of working with material things, with which some stated they have a very close relationship with; some others said that they were motivated by the idea of “meeting local people” and “getting into the history of the place”, while others simply wanted “to escape from Rome”, to escape from a ‘very strict’ work environment.

After the participants’ presentations, Alessandro from ‘the Studio’ introduced us to their kit “Rf-id mon amour”, one of the few ‘real’ products developed in ‘the

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<sup>81</sup> “In Lecce the various components of the tobacco industry (which counted 68 companies and 60 warehouses) redefined the local economic and political equilibriums: tobacco guaranteed ‘secure earnings’ for large and medium-sized landowners and the professional and commercial classes, while providing a forum for ‘meeting and mediating with the Fascist State’. Looked after by the ‘protective’ apparatus of the State, the landowning aristocracy and professional and entrepreneurial classes in those years became industrialists ‘sui generis’, engaged in the running of tobacco processing plants and associated activities under state licence” (Danitto 1996: 103, cited in Trono & Pesare s.d.: 381).

<sup>82</sup> This label (state capitalism) has been applied by economists and historians to the whole history of Italian state-economy relations (Foot 2003: 144)

<sup>83</sup> My translation from the Italian of the program: [http://www.pugliaalive.net/home/news\\_det.php?nid=21942](http://www.pugliaalive.net/home/news_det.php?nid=21942)

Studio' that they sell for exhibitions and museums. We would use this kit for attaching the visual media to the objects that we were also going to produce. When presenting this kit, Antonia stressed that the aim of the workshop was not the objects, but people's experiences (participants), and that the telling of these experiences would be the Interactive Exhibition. I was intrigued with this notion of Interaction, for it had this double sense: on the one hand we would use these Rf-id tags to activate objects and make them tell a story, so that when a visitor touches an object, it activates the visual content we would produce and attach to it - this is one of the most basic techno-interactive tools. On the other hand, in order to produce those contents we were supposed to 'interact' with the place, 'reading the place' and communicate its atmosphere through visual and material media, so the experience of the place would be *the interaction*. But in what ways does 'reading the place' count as interaction? What kind of relationship is imagined between the place and our 'reading'/interpretation of it? How was 'the place' going to be in the objects and images we were going to produce or, in other words, how would those objects index (Gell 1998) the place?

Regarding the idea of 'Diffuse Museum', Architect Severino stresses the importance of establishing *a relationship* with the identity of the place within this workshop. However, to integrate local people into this project in his opinion is difficult, but "to copy, to assimilate and transform it in a real passage from the experience" would be a better idea. Thus, the approach starts to be framed as artistic interpretation and subjectivity, and it was continuously stressed throughout the activity that the existing is one thing (the memory, the 'identity of the place'), whereas what we wanted to create was quite another: it should be something *new*, creative, as an interpretation of the place, not a reproduction of it. So there is a constant separation between 'creation' and the world. A tension between 'interpretation' and local memory, history, the past – the message was constantly to avoid presenting it 'as it is'; a tension between art/fiction and 'truth'. 'Creativity' thus, is a process that is supposed to emerge from a separation from the outside ('objectivity'): there is approximation (the 'local' experience), and at the same time, differentiation (the stress that what matters is an 'interpretation', instead of reproduction of reality).

We started our 'experience of the place' with a walk outside the factory, through the sunflower fields that used to be where one would find the tobacco crops,

and afterwards, we moved to Severino's place, who lived about a few kilometers away from the *ex-Tabacchificio*, where we were going to have lunch. During this lunch we had another architect and designer (who is a quite famous designer) speaking to us, setting out "the spirit of the project". He was Alessio Baldassare<sup>84</sup>, from Naples, a representative of the Italian craftsmanship movement in architecture also known as 'poor design' (*design ultrapoverissimo*), anti-design or design anti-consumerism<sup>85</sup>.

Baldassare talked to us about the importance of starting from objects, from materiality, the Italian craftsmanship tradition. He suggested for us to work with wood – although there was total freedom he suggested it would be interesting if this topic would be approached. Only later I understood what this movement was: in a public presentation of the project *Museo Diffuso* that took place in a cultural center, late in the afternoon, Alessio Baldassare contrasted the design *ultrapoverissimo* with current trends in design which do not aim for anything more beyond communication. "Nowadays it is thought that design is to show", criticizing what he considers "a pocket of self-referentiality", whereas for him, "communication is between a product and its use" (my translation). He contends that creativity emerges from communication, telling us that he is from "a time when communication in design was a different thing to what it is nowadays". To him, creativity is not something that refers to the invention phase only, "the myth of the individual creator is an American dream: one must return to the idea of the workshop (*bottega*)". Besides the "sensitivity of craftsmanship", he also appeals for the importance of departing from "local culture", the need for "a direct kind of communication, with a concrete gesture, maybe primitive" – and he exemplifies what he means by that by quickly making a mask in paper and putting it on his face.

## **Whose stories? The difficulties in passing from analysis to synthesis**

This message on the urge to communicate and interact with 'the local', craft, the sensuous' and 'materiality' soon starts to contradict with the designer's difficulty

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<sup>84</sup> This name, just as with the other names in this thesis, is fictitious.

<sup>85</sup> "The anti-design movement was highly critical of technical progress, mass-production of utilitarian objects and consumerism. Several radical design groups have been founded in Italy, including Archizoom, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum, UFO, and 9999 (...)" (retrieved from: <http://www.art-directory.info/design/riccardo-dalisi-1931/index.shtml> ).

in dealing with use and everything that is outside their own fore-planning. This issue provokes an interesting debate about Modernism among the architects. On one of those days, at dinner, Pietro Pasquale, the organizer of this event (who is an architect), was commenting on how he thinks the message from Baldassare was interesting and important in this particular time of crisis, for it points out “the importance of looking at the other”, approaching design as “an act of communication with the world around us”. Thus, he thinks it is particularly important in regarding what the history of architecture has been, mainly in reference to modernism. Some, however, disagreed with the idea that “modernism was bad”: Carla, also an architect, stood against the viewpoint that Bauhaus was a mistake, in her view, it needs to be seen in its context, as part of history: “what Le Corbusier proposed was an answer to a problem that was part of his time”, she argued. Alberto, one of the participants and a friend of Pasquale, argued that “from that point of view, Hitler is also part of history, and whilst we have the responsibility to recognize it was a mistake and learn from those mistakes, we cannot simply relativize as if it were a neutral fact”. Carla replied that “it is not like that because the consequences are completely different”. For Pasquale, “the question here is the lack of social responsibility evident in the Modernist project, in particular the problem of imagining a world but disregarding the people for whom that world is imagined, which created very serious problems in terms of people’s inability to socially adapt to those spaces”.

I wondered how far the approach they were claiming for the workshop (a move from Modernism) would not reproduce the same reasoning. If the emphasis is in an authorial interpretation of ‘memory’ and history, then, *use* is not important. There is a movement from objects to stories, meaning, but the stories that count are not people’s stories, but designer’s – the idea that there is no creativity without authorship. This is concerned with the problematic idea of ‘reading the place’ and the interpretations it had along the way. For example, and back to the conversation with Baldassare at Severino’s, where he invited us to start from the materiality of local objects, there occurred the following debate: trying to understand how we were going to work, one of the participants, Giacinto, asked if we could work on an object with some functionality. According to Antonia, “definitely not”, it would be more interesting (to create) “an aesthetic object”, and that “it would be more revealing to explore an object’s symbolic capacity rather than its functionality”; because “the important point”, she argued, is “to know what kind of object we want *to design*”.

Giacinto, however, clarified that it was not function in that sense but rather of an object's *use*, in a relational way: the way it is used, experienced by someone, the meaning that someone attributed to it. He was referring to the stories that those objects could tell apart from the designers' interpretations: the stories that report to an *outside* world (of design conception), concerned with the people who used them. These stories are not important to Antonia, and she is clear that we should produce interpretations instead of presenting stories and objects in a literal way. This triggered a short though impassioned discussion that lasted until Pietro Pasquale tried to moderate tempers: he said that he thought that it is not very productive to discuss beforehand what a functional or an aesthetic/symbolic object is. So he picked up an idea that Alessandro had used – the word 'accumulations' – saying that it would be more salient to regard objects as accumulations – accumulations of meanings, functionalities, uses, etc. "So, it can be all of these things together, they are not necessarily exclusive". Still, the tension between 'whose stories' would objects tell was open and unresolved because the idea of working with 'other people's stories' unsettles a dominant model of creativity among designers, which is a cultural, widespread assumption that creativity is located in individual minds, and thus what we can abduct from an object is the intention of the maker (Leach 2007).

Users' stories do not matter to designers, because they are not recognized as active in terms of creativity. Creativity is conceived as intellectual encompassment, that is, where the "collaborative endeavour is made to appear as the outcome of a single mind's internal labouring" (ibid: 170), and so the problem for them is that 'memory' (or 'identity', or 'place') does not have a mind from which we can abduct agency and intent from. So what was clear to them was that the objects we were going to produce should stand for our (individual) creativity: they should not stand for the context that we were interpreting, or the people with whom we would interact. In other words, they were concerned with an author: the problem that the discussion raises is concerned with the taken for granted assumption in design that the objects to be produced should index an author – and thus any *use* outside of this model of creativity is excluded from that notion of the individualized author. Borrowing the words of James Leach (ibid: 167), this model of creativity and claims upon production reveals "assumptions about the nature of the person which are already embedded in particular schemes for object production".

It is this model of creativity that is also behind the problem with *use* in architecture. According to Michael Guggenheim (2010), change of use in particular had always been a problem for architects because new buildings cannot do what reuse does, and this is a difficulty for architects who do not recognize the user as an active person. Postmodernist architects, however, whilst losing some control to users (because user participation became a fashion), tried to maintain a large degree of control over the process. What happened was that there was the introduction of people in architecture, of users, but users as a type, a process where “the user as an active person is completely forgotten again”. This top-down perspective is concerned with an innovation-centered approach to design and its particular model of person and creativity: the idea that the outcome of creativity needs to have an individualized author, an intention, a mind behind. Likewise, although the ‘Diffuse Museum’ philosophy proclaimed ‘the involvement of local people’, the idea of ‘people’ as represented by used-objects is deployed merely as the virtual background to be artistically interpreted – expressed through Antonia’s notion that newly created objects are more interesting than *with-use* ones. And this is a way of reproducing the modernist differentiation, which in turn exposes the limits of these interaction designers’ notion of interaction: it is a conception of interaction based on particular assumptions of person and creativity.

After lunch, we went back to Studio Severino, where Antonia would give us explanation of how we would use video. She showed us the videos of her students in a workshop called ‘Urban Pottery’, where students imagined new objects from their ‘readings of the space’. These prototypes were presented in a stop-motion video. Antonia stressed that the video was not an object in itself, it was not used as a language, but rather the vehicle to account those little stories, and it was the instrument of those stories. This is what she expected us to produce as well: little stories that emerge from our own ‘readings’ of the place. The central concern, she says, is to know which kind of object we want to create, and what stories we want to tell with them, stressing once again that “we do need to start from the memory of the place, but the aim is not to reproduce it through interviews, but rather interpret it to produce *a new* product, designing *new* objects”. Stories, thus, were our own stories, our interpretations, rather than the stories of users, or the stories of the inhabitants of the place. Thus, this established a distance between interpreters and interpreted. The ‘memory’ is described as something external, as a characteristic of the place: passive,

objectified, *externalized* in relationship to the rather *internalized* individual creative process of interpretation.

From Antonia, Silvana and Alessandro (designers from ‘the Studio’) there was an anxiety in stressing that the place (the local, traditional, memory, identity) was not interesting, what was interesting was for us to depart from the place to create something ‘new’, an urban, artistic view of the rural. Their concern is that objects are not representations; objects should index their producer’s agency. This is the reassertion of a model of ‘author/artist’ encompassment (Leach 2007). James Leach details a conflict of claims of ownership in the collaboration between artists and scientists in a workshop. Drawing on Gell’s theory of the object’s abduction of agency, he argues that what we can abduct from the object is the intention of the maker, and intention implies a mind. But then, he asks, “how one person’s agency is to be ‘read from’ the object when it contains many inputs” (ibid: 177). Leach’s point is that Gell’s argument is premised on a kind of individualism, and “the idea that creativity, which is read as agency and power, lies within the person, and within their mind, or genius” (ibid: 179). Gell’s problem is a consequence of wider notions of the person and creativity. Creativity is part of a Euro-American tendency to locate knowledge in the *individual* mind (ibid: 183). It is precisely the idea that creativity lies in the mind (or cleverness) of the producer that we were being asked to perform: to produce objects that are representations of individual minds. But by this time, the question of what an object was an index of was still open, still being contested.

## **“Reading the place”**

The program that was offered for us during this weekend to explore the ‘traces’ included an expert on the geography of the region of Salento talking about the importance of tobacco production for this region in the past, especially in the 1920s, during fascism. He told us that businesses were run by the largest families. Harvesting and processing tobacco, as well as cotton, were activities that allowed a considerable improvement of life conditions for families as it was better paid than other types of farming. This changed the landscape of the region: olive trees which had been predominant since the Middle Ages ceased to be profitable and were then

substituted by tobacco and cotton crops. Tobacco therefore signals the end of an agricultural economic system and the change to a new, industrial one, he stressed. Also from the point of view of the daily life of people, he mentioned that people would spend their entire days here, there were many anecdotes about that way of life, – he later offered us an analysis a piece of local folklore about that life.

The next morning while planning the activities for the day (interviews with ex-workers were planned for the morning), Antonia suggested to Alessandro that instead of using object labels or text, it would be better to seek out something particularly interesting from the information collected and produce interesting objects based on it. Existing objects concerned with the history of the place are therefore excluded, reduced to merely factual evidence, seen as neutral, passive evidence of a past or context. Soon I learned that also information about the place, just like objects, is considered neutral, while the interpretation, active.

The interview with the two ex-workers, paradoxically, was a *collective* interview, it took about 35 minutes and it was filmed so that we could use it for the exhibition. Giovanni conducted the interview, asking the two invited ladies to tell us what really happened there. They told us about the routine: they usually started working at 7.00 in the morning. Those who arrived late at 8.30 would not be allowed to work. At 10.30 they would have a break for a *panino*. They would spend the entire day there. One of them worked there since she was a child. At a later date she became responsible for the work inside, in the part where the tobacco was dried. The tobacco was brought inside by groups of workers. Outside the factory they would collect the green leaves of tobacco and they would lay them down in a wood instrument (*tiraletto*) that they showed us that was used for drying out the tobacco leaves, and following this they would take it inside. The inside and the outside tasks were separated and they were done by different workers, and this established a kind of hierarchy, as the work inside was a little bit lighter than the work outside. Those who worked inside would wear uniforms, while those who worked outside would not. Inside, leafs were chosen according to their color (color gradation was an important part of the process), the brighter the leaves the better; when they were dark, they were thrown away. They also relate that there had been ventilators inside the building.

They were then asked to give more details about the process, how were relations with the other workers. The interviewers were keen to know if the factory had been an oppressive environment.



**Figure 29:** This is a photograph of a photograph (a detail): a picture I took of one of the old photographs of the factory that were put at our disposal for the workshop. It shows the workers working inside the factory.

They describe how usually they worked sat on benches, one in front of the other. They earned 600 *lire*. They were asked about which instruments they had used: they said their hands. They would work up to the 8th month of pregnancy and could not bring their children inside the building. There were few maternity rights. One of them started working there at 14 years old, something that she stated was quite normal at that time. She worked there until 1972.

When asked to describe the atmosphere, they told the gate was closed during the night and that there was a guard. They also commented on more sensorial kinds of details: the smell of tobacco was not quite pleasant, they said. There was a kind of greasy gum that would stick to their hands.

The ladies had also been asked to tell some of the stories that were popular among them, the anecdotes people used to tell about that environment and also to perform some songs that people used to sing while working. Some of the participants who were *Leccese* and grew up there knew these songs, and they also performed what they knew, in dialect.

I was intrigued that the interview process was approached in such a uniform way and that it took a collective form. This happened obviously for logistical reasons – we had only three days to work – however, I realized that nobody questioned that: information about the place seemed to be considered as just information transfer. Testimonies through the interview are seen as a neutral process of transferring information – all of these things (interview, the geographer’s information about the region) were to be encompassed through our creative interpretations, so they are not recognized as active contributions in themselves. The background for action is representational knowledge about the world preceding the world as such (Suchman 1987), a way of constructing the world in our mind prior to our engagement with it, and in such a way that these representations substitute the engagement.

This process resonates the distinction Leach makes between natural creativity and the Euro-American mode of creativity. According to Leach there is “a difference between what is produced as novel by an agent, and what is produced by random chance, by mutation under the constraints of natural selection” (2004: 160). The data we were gathering from the place (interview, testimonies from experts and locals, objects) was considered ‘natural’ in this sense: something that only becomes creativity once it is assimilated and transformed by artistic agency. This data has the same status as objects: “The outcomes of creative action are explicitly objects or practices which bear the imprint of planning (novelty, inventive step, utility). These in turn become properties of the object, while creativity remains with the person (ibid). According to Leach, what this process reproduces is the Euro-American self (ibid: 162) – a notion of self that is based on a separation between persons and things (or subjectivity and objectivity, mind and body), and therefore a tendency to locate reason or knowledge in the individual mind<sup>86</sup>. This particular notion of self is

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<sup>86</sup> He demonstrates that this mode of creativity is foreign to the Rai Coast, where creativity is recognised when it involves input from outside physical matter (Leach 2004: 166) and where “Emphasis is placed not on the intellectual aspect of the creation (a single mind labouring), but on the reproductive potential of the thing itself” (ibid: 167). For them, subjectivity is distributed in objects, which allows for a conception of a distributed creativity (ibid: 169).

reproduced through the operation of the abstracted intellect in which the appropriative mode of creativity is based. To the Euro-Americans creativity itself, he defends, is absent from structures and objects: “It exists within the mind/person. The creative process (...) is abstracted from the everyday and from ‘the world’” (ibid: 169). Euro-Americans separate that which gives purpose (the mind/will) from the physicality of the body (ibid).

Commenting on the interview, some of the participants said that they expected a discourse that would have evoked a much more oppressive kind of environment, but what they heard was actually much more relaxed. According to Baldassare that was because they were not just workers, they had higher roles in the hierarchy than others. Referring in particular to one of the ladies who was more confident, Baldassare points out the irony with which this lady talked, her sense of superiority: “it would be important to capture this sense of life”, he suggests to us.

After the interview, some old working tools and machinery that were stored in the building had been put at our disposal for inspiration. One of the most important objects concerned with the activity was the “*tiraletto*”, the wood instrument that was used to put the tobacco plant drying out in the sun. Baldassare appealed to the use of these “tangible things” because of their importance in stimulating memory: “not only the words (are important), but also the things, the songs, the tangible things”, he mentioned, suggesting that the “trajectory of memory can be those traces”.

Severino and his wife had gathered local blackberries and put them at our disposal to be tasted: they wanted to provide us with a sensorial experience, the experience of the ‘countryside’. Stressing the creative possibilities of “using tangible things”, Baldassare picked up some blackberries to make a drawing, a very rough kind of drawing with everyone around him, watching him, photographing him and his spontaneous performance. Baldassare continued his discourse, claiming “it is important to recover these things that are being lost in a time of consumerism and accumulation”. Severino’s wife, dressed in a white embroidered dress, looking very hippie, added that “it is not tobacco itself, it is the relationship between Man and Nature”, “a return to ourselves”, telling us “to feel these vibrations as if antennas”: “the important thing”, she told us, “is that each of you try each of these things and produce a different meaning”. They wanted us to feel and express some kind of primitivism of the countryside, the idea of ‘returning’ to something pure, a more

authentic, a more natural and simple lifestyle: all of these ideas were being celebrated, dramatized. It was in this sense a very urban framework about that context – it is only more natural and authentic if compared to something else, that is, the urban.

All of these aspects were presented to us to work with as sensorial stimuli. We did not discover it by ourselves – they were presented to us as such. We were being guided in this experience, it was already framed for us – we had not the opportunity to explore it our own way. In that sense, this ‘interaction’ was limited to the way it was selectively “packaged” beforehand and presented to us. ‘Reading the place’ was not totally free for exploration, but there was a clearly defined program of activities. It was a *planned* form of interaction. This presupposes that the potential effects of the material analyzed are not recognized, while the information collected is merely background, passive. There is one part of the interaction that is instrumentalized, objectified, in which the subjective self is the only active element in the relationship. In that sense, what is presented to us is *representation* of knowledge about the world, just as “For cognitive science, the background of action is not the world as such, but knowledge about the world” (Suchman 1987: 43). For example, returning to the discourse of Baldassare, his emphasis on design *ultrapoverissimo* is already a way of frameworking the world, a framework in particular that only makes sense within these wider processes of imagining transition, an imagined ‘virtual’, post-industrial age.

The paradox of focusing on craft in a moment of dematerialization (of labor and information) is that the ‘return to materiality, the tactile and the sensuous’, the ‘fetishization of material objects’ (McPherson 2009: 461) that the design *ultrapoverissimo* of Baldassare suggests may signal the transition between modes of production, the celebration of “a new materialism at precisely the moment the economy begins to go virtual” (ibid.). This “nostalgia for ‘the real’, or fetishization of the tangible” that was also suggested for us to experience, as Candlin & Guins (2009: 5) argue, “is only possible when digital technologies are understood as being less material or less significantly material than other objects”.

This problem between the representation/represented somehow arose when participants started to question what was the relevance of the idea of ‘*Museo Diffuso*’ in relation to all of this. The interview had been video-recorded and we were supposed to use it in combination with the objects we were going to produce. In the

afternoon, we were in Studio Severino to learn how to use QuickTime to edit the videos we were going to make: we could use pieces of the interview, or we could film something that we wanted to use – some people ended up doing videos of their own, more artistic ones, while others used the interview. The important thing was to make the association of each video to an object.

Although the interview was collective, as with the brainstorming session, paradoxically from then on the creative process was supposed to be individual. Whilst we had done the walks together, the interview together and then divided in groups of two for brainstorming, I was surprised and somehow disappointed that from then on each one of us should turn to his/her own ideas and be the “author” of one approach object/visual contents (video or photography) attached through Rf-id. This was when I realized that it was because from the perspective of those who designed the workshop there is no such thing as a ‘collective’ authorship: each work should stand for an individual mind. At that moment I thought: so much talk around the topic of “communication” in design, of listening to people, feeling the place, and in the end, every one is supposed to create what he/she wants, so that the communicative process is a subjective, authorial one. I realized my concerns were common to some of the other participants from the moment when another debate ensued.

One question that arose was where we would exhibit our works: it could be in a church in town, or it could happen there in the *ex-Tabachificio*. One of the participants raised the question: what difference does it make if this is going to be a diffuse museum? Another problem was that there was not a common thread for the exhibition, a project, a story to tell: everyone should create their own work, their own little art piece and the exhibition would be the collection of these individual contributions. Also, if we were going to produce objects, videos and an exhibition, then, what is the aim of the idea of ‘*Museo Diffuso*’?, someone asks. “Is it just to show the technology that allows for the association of an object to a testimony?” Silvana and Antonia explained that we should see the workshop as a process, as a performance to play with the possibilities: that is the idea of the ‘*Museo Diffuso*’. Supporting this view, Alberto added that we should all see the exhibition also as a process and not as an end – Alberto is a friend of Pietro Pasquale, and in that sense his perspective was of an insider, he shared the view about what the ‘Diffuse Museum’ is as a project.

The aim was also to make us understand the need to work with objects, they stressed. We could make any object we wanted, however, we were discouraged from using existing objects to tell a story: “objects in themselves don’t say anything”, Alessandro stressed. “What objects say is what we make them say”. Thus, it was totally up to us to decide what we were going to create. The aim, they emphasized, was *to interpret* memory instead of just reproducing it, to produce a ‘reading’. I was intrigued by this sharp distinction between interpretation and reproduction of memory, as well as between objects as literal evidence and objects as symbols, vehicles to tell stories. Are they separated after all? The participant who raised a question during lunch the previous day – the architect from Rome – intervened again, saying that his concern was if one ends up making something too conceptual, hermetic, something that is art, we would therefore lose all the reference work that we had been producing: departing from memory, the place, the objects, etc. Some of the other participants supported him, expressing that they were feeling a little bit lost and concerned with what to do with the material gathered, as the message was clear that it was not interesting to use it as literal documentation. However, if we were doing all that work to end up doing anything we wanted, then why such an effort after all? The question was how would that material ultimately appear?

Antonia immediately argued that the limitations of time are here important: we have just three days, thus, the material is inspiration, but the end-product was obviously an artistic thing. However, beyond that, what makes it special, she thinks, is the process, the experience of being there: it is this that is the ‘Diffuse Museum’. To the participant, however, “time is not determinant, what is determinant here is the strategy. The possibilities are many, we all took notes and interpretations, so now what are we going to do with this material?” he asked. “We learnt that there is this (technical) possibility of activating the interview, connecting the interview to the objects: the issue is that we don’t now know what to do with it”. Silvana added: “the important thing is: you should see the ‘Museo Diffuso’ as this moment that you are living, the exhibition is just our interpretation of that experience”. That was when another participant mentioned one of Baldassare’s ideas, the idea of a ‘magic object’: the idea that objects can activate a series of ideas, working as a kind of *synthesis*. However, the problem that was being raised was how to make the passage between analysis and synthesis, between documentation, experience, gathering of information and the transformation of it into something new (the synthesis, the ‘a-ha moment’):

this is the notion of creativity as intellectual encompassment that Leach (2007) talks about.

## **The synthesis**

Before turning to the individual stage, I started working in a group with a partner for the brainstorming session. My partner was someone who, just like myself, was one of the few in the group who was also an outsider to the world of design, he had a profession that I cannot recall, though I do remember it was something very far away from the world of design and the artistic world. Antonia was giving us instructions: based on our notes and impressions, we should discuss our ideas in pairs – a kind of brainstorming, and after the discussion, each of us, *individually*, should come out with an idea of what to do: which object would we produce and which video we would make to attach to the object – the object would activate the video when manipulated by the visitor in the exhibition. We had the video of the interview at our disposal in order to think about what to do, and what pieces of the video we would like to use. By this time I was a little disappointed with the idea of turning the process into an individual one: I was expecting that the creative process would be something shared with the whole group and I was curious about that process, but it was not going to be like that: in a group capacity there was only the brainstorming in pairs. My partner and I were both a little bit lost, because neither of us knew what to do with the notes and impressions, how to turn them in an idea of an object that we should produce. Antonia and Silvana gave us a lot of freedom, saying “it was up to us, it didn’t matter the process” (the way of getting to the synthesis), “*as it is always a very personal thing*, everyone has their own way, the important thing is to come out of this discussion with a plan”.

My partner decided to work on the idea of the ‘circularity of nature’: it was his interpretation of the process, and he presented it as his ‘concept’. Antonia was happy with it, but she said we needed to think how to transform this idea into an object. We thought about some ideas, but then the problem was that all of those ideas were detached from that environment, there was no reference to it, so to speak. For myself in particular, I expressed that I wanted to depart from my notes, reviewing the

information I had gathered, which was not much, and then to work from there. Antonia found that problematic, as it did not seem interesting to her to depart from notes, so she advised me to work differently, to think about an idea for an object: we had just one day left to make the objects, videos and exhibition. “The material is not so important”, she said, “what is vital at this stage is to produce something original”. But my problem was how could I think about an object that is ‘original’ in an abstract way, detached from the ‘observed’ reality? Would that mean I should create a concept and then make the object as a translation of that concept, in an abstract way? To me this sounded like an inversion of what we had been doing, the reason why we were there. For Antonia that was precisely the point of the exercise: the challenge for those of us who are not familiar with creativity and design or arts is to think about objects in an abstract way, what they mean, their symbolic potential, and not just what they *represent*. I tried to make my point that ‘producing a representation’ was not exactly my concern when I stated that I wanted to ‘start from the material’.

I had underlined a few expressions in my notebook regarding the atmosphere, the sensorial environment as described by the factory workers – particular smells, the greasy hands, the age that they started working; I also liked the idea of the structure, the hierarchy, so I wanted to combine the two things in an object. I expressed this to Antonia and my partner, as a matter of exemplification of what I meant by ‘starting from the material’. Antonia stated that we would not have time to do an ‘analysis’ and besides that was not the point, it should be something simple, any impression would do. We needed to have a concept – “what was my concept?”, she asked me. She exemplified with my partner’s concept of the ‘circularity of nature’, which she considered fine as ‘a concept’. “But the ‘circularity of nature’ is an a-priori idea”, I contended, “it doesn’t have any particular relationship with the context that we were working in, it is a general idea about the countryside”. I was not convinced that this way of thinking would help me in the process of ‘creating’ something.

I thought again and returned a few minutes later, proposing some ideas I liked: I was interested in how the *biography* of the building intersected with the *biographies* of the people that passed through it, and I wanted to express that idea. I was intrigued by the idea of biography, so that was my *concept*. When I told that to Antonia, she looked at me suspiciously, as if I missed the point of the exercise. She told me “it is not interesting to reproduce biographies”. Antonia was concerned that I

would use my notes in a documentary style, but that was not my aim. I was interested in the way the building of the ex-factory referred to all of those people's lives and how they are so *intermeshed* with one another and in that way the building had a biography too. What I needed was to *translate* that idea into a physical thing, but I did not know how.

What I wanted to do was to start from the material I had in order to think about something. My problem was not in being abstract or using objects in a metaphoric way: but metaphors would have to come from somewhere. In other words, I was concerned with the link between the two things (analysis and synthesis): I did not want to impose an abstract interpretation on the reality I was interpreting. I was concentrated on the analysis while Antonia was concentrated on the product (the synthesis). I did not want to expose 'material' in the final product, what I did not know was how to pass from one thing to the other without just creating something artificially, without any connection to the context that we were working around. To Antonia, however, the analysis stage is just instrumental to the synthesis one (the new combinations): and this seems to me paradigmatic in the way designers make the 'jump' to the synthesis stage. This is where the separation is made: 'truth' is one thing, interpretation is another one. In order to correspond to the aims of what the others were doing, I had to learn that there was no link to be made, but rather an 'intellectual' separation that was hard for me to conceive.

What this situation exposes is not just a personal conflict but an engagement between different ways of producing knowledge: the ethnographic and the artistic/design. I am detailing my own process of involvement in learning a particular model of creativity but what is at play are different versions of production of the new, different ways of conceiving the generative potential: different versions of creativity.

The question between analysis and synthesis had emerged in another situation previously in my fieldwork. Once I attended a lecture that Osvaldo gave at Bicocca University, where he had been invited to speak to students of computer science and students of social communication. The lecture was entitled "Against user-centered design", where he clearly expressed his vision that 'user-centered' design is the antithesis to progress. He argued that user-centered design may be important in the refinement stage of developing a product, and also for communicating the process – that is why it is used by companies such as Ideo in Palo Alto, where user-centered

design is used as an important means of communication. However, in the ‘world of design’ it is perfectly irrelevant: “in regards to having ideas, it is vital to have people who come from different areas rather than using UCD methods; in regards to proposing something new, UCD is simply not important”. This is because, according to him, the relationship between analysis and synthesis is not linear, thus the fact that we use user-centered methods does not guarantee that we will arrive at a more creative result; it is not because we observe users or ask them what they want that we will arrive to a necessarily good solution, he stated. UCD, just as in the case of my difficulties with this exercise, gives priority to the analysis rather than the synthesis.

Oswaldo is probably right in arguing that the passage between analysis and synthesis is not linear, however, he uses this argument to justify a design-driven conception of innovation, where the stress is put on the one side of the dichotomy – subjective creativity, radical breaks, the new – rather than in what is in between. This corresponds to a classic conception of innovation. However, the contingency that is in between analysis and synthesis is not recognized, it is made invisible (intellectually encompassed): in other words, everything outside creative subjectivity is considered passive, neutral, instrumental to designers’ agency, something to break with, to move beyond: it is not this that we were supposed to read from an object or an art-piece that is the result of creativity. The creative process is then internalized, the encompassment is how it is transformed inside the (creative) ‘mind’ – and becomes invisible. The analysis – and all the relational work with the external world – needs to be transformed into the intention of the maker. This is a tension between art and science, where science always becomes subordinated to art. Oswaldo expresses this more clearly on another occasion, when he stated that “all in all, being trained as a designer, I have this limit of imagining the relationship between analysis and project always reversed: it is never the analysis that leads the project, but it is the project which leads the analysis”.

The problem that is being discussed here refers to a tension between description and creativity/innovation. From the designers’ point of view, ethnography is concerned with describing the world, something that is not considered ‘creative’, whereas from the ethnographer’s point of view, it is hard to conceive ‘the new’ without taking ‘the world’ into consideration. Both risk essentializing – though in opposite ways and through opposite prioritizations – the question of ‘where does the new come from?’: one by focusing on the ‘inside’ of an intellectual process of

creativity and interpretation and the other one by focusing on the potential creativity of the ‘outside’.

Thus, although this was meant to be group-work – in fact we started by discussing our ideas in groups – the work itself was going to be individual, which just reinforces the idea of creativity as an internalized process rather than an interactive one shared with other collectives<sup>87</sup>. “It is the sequence – external world – mental representation – internal modification of representation – imposition of form upon external world – that lies behind this” (Leach 2007: 182-183). This is, in other words, “a model of how things come into being and one reliant upon an impermeable subject/object divide” (ibid.). The idea of ‘creating something *new* rather than asking users what they want’ that I spoke of in other chapters is thus based on a radicalization of the modern dualism in creativity, where the ‘new’, the truly creative is assumed as an individualized and mental product of creativity as intellectual encompassment rather than a relationship, in opposition to a kind of positivist version of an outside world as the ‘truth’.

So back in the workshop I had to make that jump too. As it was a rule that we should not work with “real” objects or with objects with use but we should rather create our own, I thought about making a small miniature *tiraletto*. Antonia said it was fine. My partner was thinking about using a ‘ready-made’ object, that is, he wanted to use the objects that we had being presented with early as inspiration, but Antonia advised him to create something new. He did not appear the next day – not necessarily for that reason – but he did end up giving up. I also felt a bit discouraged at this time; I felt we were being treated as outsiders, unable to do what others were doing. I also gave up on the idea of reproducing a miniature *tiraletto* as soon as I begun to make it, as it turned out to be more difficult to make than I initially thought. I started to make it in card, but it did not work out. Besides, Giovanni was already making one, and his looked far better than mine – he is skilled in making architecture models as that is his work. Besides the technical advantage, there was the ‘creative’ one, and this was the most intriguing for me: I felt so envious about his idea – he was making a small *tiraletto* with sugar bags, those that usually accompany any *espresso* coffee, that he had collected. Those sugar bags often contain messages, so he had chosen some of the more suggestive ones in relation to the environment that we were

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<sup>87</sup> ‘Collectives’ is a term I borrow from Latour (2005).

referring to. One of the messages we could read, for example, was: “sweeten your life because the air is bitter”<sup>88</sup>. The relationship with the ‘material gathered’ was obviously not a direct one, it was metaphoric – the material was already far away, separated. So I decided to think metaphorically as well, making that separation.



**Figure 30:** a picture of Giovanni’s *tiralto* with sugar bags (photograph: Andrea Gaspar).

Thinking about that separation, I also liked, for example, the work of one of the girls that was very simple: just a small bottle, closed, empty, with a label attached identifying it as ‘air’. This would activate a part of the interview where the ex-factory workers referred to the smells and the more sensorial aspects of the environment. I liked this idea a lot, I found it brilliant: the typical object from where we abduct an author’s intellect and intention, Gell’s basic idea that we can abduct from the object the intention of the maker: it was this after all that was expected of us. The object stands not for the contexts but for the maker inventive ‘genius’.

I thought some more about the problem at hand. I tried to concentrate on the building, because it is the building that aggregates all those ideas that impressed me most: people’s biographies and the way they all connected to the building, the idea of structure and hierarchy, etc. I concentrated on the metaphoric potential of the idea of *enmeshment* of biographies: material, personal, etc., and thought about translating that materially. I wanted to express this connection between an object and people’s lives, real names, real people. That was how I thought about making something that represents the building and then attach threads with names, real local names to it, all enmeshed in a messy way. I would call it *rete* (network).

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<sup>88</sup> “Addolcisci la vita, che l’aria è amara”



**Figure 31:** This is a photograph of a photograph: a picture I took of one of the old photographs of the factory that were put at our disposal to use in the exhibition/workshop. This was one of the images that I used in my work: my 'object' activated a sequence of 'real' images of workers, like this one, that were projected.

Finally, when I outlined this idea to Antonia she said she liked it. So that is what I did. I built a very rough structure as I did not have much time left, then I asked those who were *Leccese* to randomly give me local names, I wrote them in pieces of paper and attached them to the threads. The object, vaguely representing the building, activated a sequence of old photographs of workers and whole families that I photographed and then I made a sequence with it.

In the exhibition, my object was no better or worse than the others' objects: I was happy it had succeeded among the other objects, which means that I had learned the process of 'how they do it': I had just succeeded in the exercise of 'intellectual encompassment' that was expected of me and is implied in a particular model of creativity (Leach 2007).



**Figure 32:** A picture of our objects in exhibition. Mine is the box-shaped one (photograph: Andrea Gaspar).

## **Conclusion: some considerations on post-Fordism**

The story goes that post-Fordism is a kind of post-modernization of production (Hardt in Virno & Hardt 1996: 4), based on the centrality of language and communication – the idea that labor becomes increasingly defined by linguistic performance (Marazzi 2008) and that language and communication becomes economic (Lazzarato 1996: 143). Post-Fordism, and in that sense the ‘communicative paradigm’, is a kind of background, informing a sort of post-industrial collective imaginary in Italy (cf. Molé 2010; Muehlebach 2011). The practices I describe are located in an imagination of fluidity and immateriality, hence the claim that they are working on a prototype for a ‘Diffuse Museum’ – immaterial, without physical structure, based on stories rather than objects; the claim that they use ‘Interaction Design’ and interactive technologies to activate relationships between people and so forth.

One essential feature of post-Fordism is the decentralization of production where the boundaries between production and consumption gets blurred (cf. Dean 2009: 4; 25), and thus in theory, the split between author and audience is transcended: “The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, or producer and user is simultaneously transcended within the ‘labor processes’ and reimposed as political command within the ‘process of valorization’” (Lazzarato 1996: 134). Also in theory, “the consumer intervenes in an active way in the composition of the product” (ibid: 142), or in other words, “the public is a constitutive element of the productive process” (ibid: 145). Some see this shift in paradigm as an emancipatory potential: a pre-figuration of a liberation of the multitude, the potential autonomy from capitalist control (Hardt in Marazzi 2008: 2); in a post-Marxist vein, the value of ‘mental’, ‘cognitive’, ‘immaterial work’ is celebrated as potentially emancipatory<sup>89</sup>. These theories on post-Fordism, however, are superficial as they fail to see the model of creativity that lies behind this process: the assumptions that are associated with a particular model of creativity. Post-Fordist economy may be centered on communication instead of production, but communication is still centered on producers/creators/authors/designers’ agency.

Post-Fordism freed designers from usability – the work is focused on the communication system of the commodities rather than on material commodities themselves, and thus allowing design to be focused on the production of fictions, stories. However, a modern asymmetry similar to that between experts and lay people (Guggenheim 2010; 2011) is still found in the relationship established with ‘other people stories’. The prototype-making of a ‘Diffuse Museum’ was, in theory, a mode of ‘involving users’ (consumers of history and culture) into ‘active’ producers of culture. The idea of ‘Diffuse Museum’ was based on a (post-Fordist) shift of focus from objects to stories – but whose stories are these? I described how ‘other people stories’ are made irrelevant. Just as use is made irrelevant in modern architecture, likewise the stories that count in design-as-fiction are designer’s ones, those which are a product of an intellectual, artistic process of interpretation. I

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<sup>89</sup> This is because of the split between ‘hand’ and ‘mind’ that was on the basis of the idea of ‘general intellect’ (Virno in Virno & Hardt 1996: 21), thus, “(i)n Fordism, according to Gramsci, the intellect remained outside production; only when the work has been finished does the Fordist worker read the newspaper, go to the local party headquarters, think, have conversations. In post-Fordism, however, since the ‘life of the mind’ is included fully within the time-space of production, an essential homogeneity prevails” (Virno 2004: 103). Thus, we have the idea that ‘a new mass’ of intellectuality has come into being (Lazzarato in Virno & Hardt 1996: 134).

argued that this is based on a model of the author: the idea that there needs to be a creator, an individual agency.

Through my participation in a workshop, I discussed how the objects to be made were supposed to be 'read' as representing each author/creator's agency, thus, the constant emphasis that 'truth' was not important. However, the problem of exhibiting 'objects with use' was this: whose intention would they represent, whose agency, whose authorship? It all needed to be assembled and encompassed by individual minds – an illustration of this is the shift from group work (that included activities such as walks through the territory, interviewing, listening to people talking about the place) to individual work when it passed to the 'creative' stage. I described the process where objects were produced that stood for individual creativity, where it became clear that it was the cleverness of the producer/creator that should be abducted. I described how, from the point of view of this model of creativity that is based on individual agency located in the mind, the passage between analysis and synthesis consists of an exercise in intellectual encompassment (Leach 2007). Thus, in order to become an 'active' producer (of post-Fordist 'communication') one has to turn oneself into a creator, whereby being 'active' equates to being 'creative'. The design-driven conception of innovation (that is opposed to a use-driven one) is based on this model of creativity that locates agency in individual minds. It is also this model that supports the common assumptions of innovation more generally, especially among those who are a product of art and design academies, as it is specifically in the case of design in Italy. Unveiling this process helps us understand how modern innovation works, and on what assumptions it is based.

Thus, the post-Fordist idea that the consumer becomes a producer is wrong: the modern dualistic and asymmetric relationships are reproduced through this model of creativity and authorship – an asymmetry that is reproduced through the hierarchy between analysis and synthesis, where analysis is subjugated to synthesis. Use, as well as other people's stories, meanings and worldviews are thus discarded as 'analysis' that is not important to 'reproduce' literally. In the process that I have described, there was a strict dualism between 'representation' and 'creativity' expressed through the idea that what is more interesting and important than 'giving the truth' is to encompass everything inside the brain producing original authorized contributions. The pervasiveness of this is the idea that what is new is only this, the idea that this is the only version of innovation: it is not just that other people's

'productions' (either objects or stories) are not recognized as 'creativity' and that other people's contributions are erased in the process, not recognized as active; it is the 'creative' power of interaction itself that is not recognized. It is in this sense that the asymmetry of modernity between 'experts' and 'lay' people, producers and consumers, active and passive, is not broken down, it is rather reproduced in new ways. For this reason I see Post-Fordism not as post-modernization of production, but a rather intensification of modernity.

## 5. Flexibility

### Performing flexibility: ‘new work’ and flexible skills in design

The first time I went to ‘the School’ I understood why ‘the Studio’s office was usually so empty: everyone from ‘the Studio’ was in ‘the School’. Compared with ‘the Studio’s’ office, ‘the School’ life seemed quite intense. I turned to Osvaldo and complained about the difficulty of doing ethnography in this kind of context that is much more fluid and mobile than I could ever have imagined. So I joked that I arrived to the field expecting to find people working in an office and what I found was people always moving around, making the work quite difficult for the anthropologist. In his usual way of speaking through metaphors, Osvaldo commented that it is as if I was a botanist proposing to make a study about trees and suddenly I realize that trees fluctuate. So maybe the approach I should adopt is not that of the botanist but rather the zoologist, he said, suggesting that the problem here was not that people move from the office: the problem was my model of people.

Adapting our models (or representations of the world) to the world in the way that Osvaldo ironically suggested to me is a matter of practical, embodied skills or tacit knowledge (Ingold 2000; 2007; Grasseni 2004; Gunn 2004; Hutchins 1995; Polanyi 1965; 1969), that is, a way of adapting, changing action through the course of doing it. It is to this notion of flexibility (flexible skills) from the point of view of designers and how they emerge in conversations regarding their professional careers and education that this chapter is concerned with.

The tree-like or botanical model of office work corresponds to the conception of work in the time of ‘organized capitalism’, concerned with Fordism and a Weberian conception of the office (Sennett 2006) – the one which is presently in crisis according to theories on transformations in the world of work (Sennett 1998; 2002; Gorz 1999; Bauman 2000; Thrift 2005, 2008). Following Osvaldo, I found many signs of that crisis – or the performativity of it. The crisis of that model of work leads to another (no less metaphorical) model: that of the network – more fluid, dynamic, open, exterritorial, etc. (the one requiring a ‘zoological model’). This crisis can be seen on the level of organizations: ‘the Studio’ is a quite loose form of

organization, which is not surprising bearing in mind that “[t]oday’s business organization has an element of disorganization deliberately built into it: the less solid and the more fluid it is, the better” (Bauman 2000: 154). But the shift is happening on the level of people as well: the conception of the person (and the model of action) that is presumed for working in a time of ‘new capitalism’ is shifting towards an open-ended one (Thrift 2005: 48).

Oswaldo celebrates this kind of narrative of openness and flexibility in his conception of what the designer should be. A model where people knew what to expect from work is substituted by a much more unpredictable one, which also requires other models of action (entrepreneurial action) better suited to deal with this unpredictability. Following a performative, relational view of practice (Knorr Cetina 2001) that I have been using in other chapters, in this chapter I describe how change and in particular this transition in the model of work is performed through a conception where ‘social skills’ and networks are substituting the classic idea of building a career cumulatively through specialized knowledge and technical skills: this idea of career is being substituted by more flexible and adaptive personal traits of character, as well as the idea that there is no content to be known. Content is substituted by the flexibility of ‘social skills’, through the form of relationships or the open possibilities of network articulations.

With this analysis I aim to contribute to ANT’s sociologies of innovation, as these perspectives usually do not look at the entrepreneurial narratives of innovation nor how those performances are actually associated to broader narratives such as the ‘cognitive capitalism’ or ‘post-Fordism’.

The chapter is also a practice account of a particular theory of action. The ethnographic examples are about the enactments of ANT’s philosophy of action: they detail how this ‘philosophy’ that is based on the ‘under-determination of action’ (Oppenheim 2007: 477; Latour 2005) is actually ‘used’, embodied or practiced in the contingent entrepreneurship open-ended model of person as it is performed by the figure of Oswaldo. Latour takes the expansion of design as “a fascinating tale of a change in the ways we deal with objects and action more generally” (2008: 2), or an indication of what could be called a post Promethean theory of action (ibid: 3) where what it means to “make” something is being deeply modified. In the words of Latour, “What has gone is mastery – this odd idea of mastery that refused to include the mystery of unintended consequences” (ibid: 6). These ideas about action are actually

deployed by designers themselves in the way they conceive their own profession, through their way of dealing with the new constraints and uncertainties posed by the economic crisis and the way they ‘design’ their own lives through it: the contingent actions, ‘assemblies’, ‘gatherings’ and ‘networks’ are in fact there. However, by adopting an ethnographic perspective, what matters to me is turning these ideas (networks, for example) from the *form* of analysis to the *focus* of analysis (Knox *et al* 2006: 134).

## **Ambivalent flexibility: the ‘autonomous professional’s’ dilemma**

Flexibility is an intrinsic part of a culture of innovation and creativity. Within an economy which constantly sees the need to innovate (Leach 2004: 154), creativity requires flexibility.

“Education and business models alike (and they flow into one another) emphasise adaptability and flexibility as necessary attributes for working effectively in the modern world. In extolling the virtues of developing people’s capacities and rewarding their manifestation in innovative objects (property), a recursive logic is established. (...) The effect is a perception of the world speeded up. (...) Change and speed is projected outward as a (structural) condition (technical advance), and working to establish flexible and adaptable people (Martin 1997) as a response to this acceleration is in fact the engine of perceived change and acceleration” (ibid: 153-154).

Flexibility, however, in the world of designers, is something ambivalent. Once I witnessed a conversation between Veronica, a collaborator of ‘the Studio’ from their office in Turin, and Osvaldo. Veronica was looking for a new job: she had seen an advert for a curator in Tate Modern, London, and so she wanted to hear Osvaldo’s advice on the matter. Osvaldo definitely encouraged Veronica to go abroad, to go where opportunities are. But regarding the advert, in his usual bitter-ironic style he told her it was as if she wanted to marry Cristiano Ronaldo – “the probabilities are one in a million – I would imagine that there are tons of people applying for the same job”, he said. However, if that is an area she would be motivated to work in, there should be plenty of other openings in England she could

apply for. The important thing to consider, he told her, is to decide in what area of design she would be willing to work in, and then apply for what is available. Veronica confirmed that definitely that was an area where she would like to work, however, what she was not happy with was with the idea of having to move away from Italy, it was a difficult decision for her. The conflict that Veronica was expressing is common to a great many other young designers. Often, young designers – just as with other young and qualified people – do not identify themselves with having a fixed job for life, they rather nourish other values such as flux, flow, constant change, and they use other metaphors to describe their life in relation to previous generations. But while on the one side, they celebrate freedom (professional autonomy, mobility), on the other they stress the constraint that this freedom entails – uncertainty (no jobs guaranteed) and risk, the impossibility of having the lives of previous generations (centered on family, class, community, work stability, etc.). This conflict is concerned with the ambivalence of flexibility – it is where an optimistic ideology of progress conflicts with a pessimistic one, based on uncertainty and job insecurity.

Oswaldo was trying to convince Veronica that she was “thinking in a traditional way”. The important decision, he told her, was to think about which kind of life she wants, because according to him, “the world of 30 years ago doesn’t exist anymore – the world where people would have a job for life, working for the same company their whole lives, like the generation of his parents”. To Oswaldo, this is the world of the past. “Those people didn’t move, they rarely travelled, they lived in the same place for their whole lives, and they were very happy with it”. This contrast between generations that Oswaldo refers to is the contrast between a model of organized capitalism and a ‘flexible’ new one – the end of an era of stability.

Organized capitalism, as Sennett (1998) remarks, was characterized by routine, straight roadways of career and predictable plans, linear time, linear life-narratives and identities: it was the time of corporate culture with a bureaucratic structure that rationalized the use of time, authority, unions and welfare state; people knew what they could expect in terms of life-plans – for example, they knew when they could retire. The time-frame was long-term because of the existence of a social contract of life-time employment. In flexible capitalism, in contrast, freedom substitutes routine, there are no fixed roles, there is a celebration of independence, of

improvisation and the openness to change, to take risks. The long term is substituted by short-term, on the one hand because it is a consumption-driven culture (Sennett 1998: 105), and on the other hand because “the traditional career progressing step by step is withering” (ibid: 22). There is also no distinction between work time and leisure or family time; organizations are more horizontal (based on networks instead of pyramids).

Oswaldo pointed to Lisen as an example of this new flexibility, as she was moving to Qatar, where she was offered an academic position. “She probably had to make some choices in her life too”, he said. Then he turned to me as another example, because of my temporary ‘nomadic’ situation of leaving ‘home’ to be there doing fieldwork. I strongly emphasized that it was my choice.

An aspect that is usually associated with a life-strategy that is more typical of the deregulated version of modernity that Bauman describes is the dependence on individual choice. The work ethic and the delay of gratification that corporate culture and paternalistic institutions such as welfare state allowed for are now substituted by an emphasis on active people, and thus life-narrative and strategies become matters of personal will and choice (Sennett 1998: 129; 132). To Oswaldo that is the future: change, flexibility, the capacity to take risks; that is why he pointed to people like me or Lisen as examples of people who are already *adapted* to this kind of world. He describes this world that we need to adapt to as something external to us.

Thus, Oswaldo was trying to show Veronica that people who try to design their life plans according to the references of the previous generation will soon find themselves professionally unadapted because “the world is not going in that direction”. However, Veronica commented that it was not that she did not want to change environment or have a more international kind of experience, her problem was with the impossibility of planning her life: “having kids, etc.”. Her point was the impossibility of *designing* a life. This is where flexibility in the sense of freedom (from geographic and territorial constraints, a question of personal autonomy and free-will) starts to collide with more ambivalent feelings – to Veronica that is not a choice, it is rather an imposition.

Veronica stands for the rational, calculated model of action towards life-plans

and professional career. In contrast, in Osvaldo's narrative there is a kind of celebration of the unpredictability and improvisation, a model of action capable of dealing with unpredictability and openness, more like Trukese navigators (Suchman 1987), the planned way being substituted by improvisation. I have already explored in other chapters the idea that that model of action is concerned also with a vision that innovation and "growth doesn't happen in that neat, bureaucratically planned way", as American techies would say (Sennett 1998: 62). Associated with this vision there is also the view that there is not a method or any specific knowledge needed to come up with good ideas, but rather other sorts of skills (flexible skills) are required – a topic that I will explore further in this chapter. This corresponds to the celebration of the new capitalist's ideal character traits of flexibility, disorder and fragmentation, or the encouragement of spontaneity – the kind of traits of character which appear among people truly at home in the new capitalism. It is the end of an idea of progress, or, as Bauman describes, progress has been individualized, deregulated and privatized (2000: 135). It is this notion of individualized progress that Osvaldo performs. Progress that does not depend on the 'outside' – society, organized capitalism, professions, careers, welfare state – but rather other values like 'autonomy' and self-entrepreneurship seem to occupy the myth of a model of action more based on improvisation – the ideal type exemplified by the "Trukese navigator" (Suchman 1987), or the wayfarer (Ingold 2007) – and indeed also actor-network theory (Latour 2005; Oppenheim 2007): in sum, a relational and open ended view of subjecthood and action.

Osvaldo particularly embodies the ambiguities associated with the idea of 'flexibility' – he personifies the volatility and the predicament of new capitalist life that is based on an open model of action, as I detailed in the chapter where I introduced 'the Studio'. Osvaldo already 'lives in a world' where change and flexibility are 'a reality' for him, he is not just adapting to it – he is performing it, he is designing it, he is contributing to its creation. Permanence and stability – either in a career based on technical skills or in a geographic territory, are not seen as glamorous. Permanence and stability in job perspectives and careers are concerned with 'what is' rather than 'what can be' – the ethos of potency (Sennett 2006). The ethos of potency requires a different conception of action, more based on improvisation and unpredictable ways of acting rather than more rational, planned

ones. Another expression of the flexibilization process comes with Osvaldo's idea that what matters in a design career is not any form of possession or achievement – of knowledge, of skills – he stresses that design is putting things in operation (referring to social skills), rather than cumulative achievements. In the following section I will describe how Osvaldo, contrasting the *new* work with the old one, convinces others that this the new way of working is 'the future', analyzing in turn how this is influenced by post-Fordist idea of flexible specialization of production (also known as 'just in time manufacturing').

## **Flexible skills and the 'ethos of potency'**

In July 2009, Osvaldo involved me in a project he was starting with 'the Studio': the creation of a design school in Turin. The negotiations were ongoing with a partner of his network of relationships, entrepreneurs from Turin in the real estate business. Osvaldo often stressed the importance of social relationships in design, arguing that networks are more important than anything else, together with another factor that he calls a good library of references – thus, referring to social capital on one side, and cultural capital on another one. To him, "design is totally a social activity". Therefore, he stressed the importance of 'social skills', a concept that intrigued me – it is this topic that I want to now turn to.

Some details in the negotiation process for this school illustrate the articulation of his conception of 'new work' with the idea of design as management. Based on other examples such as the Mountain School of Arts in Los Angeles, his idea was to create an independent kind of private design school for post-graduate students, but with a model where the students would not have to pay for doing their courses because the school would be highly selective: there would be a very restricted limit of students – 20 students. I already accounted that 'the School' is, generally, a Fine Arts Academy, and Osvaldo was the director of the design department of this Academy: he was by that time in charge of the BA in design. His plan was to associate 'the School' to the project of the creation of this new design school in Turin, though he still needed to convince his partners about it.

The role he had proposed for me in order to participate was to produce the materials in English for the new school, so one day I accompanied him to a meeting

in Turin with his friends, where he was going to convince them of associating ‘the School’ to the project for the new one. On the train he explained me the setting: we were going to meet with Claudio and Marcello. Marcello, who is Claudio’s boss, is an architect and belongs to a family of entrepreneurs from Turin who own and manage a wide range of spaces in the city. One of those spaces was intended for the new school. Before meeting with Marcello, we had an informal talk with Claudio who we joined for lunch, where Claudio and Osvaldo discussed the strategy and the possibilities of forming a partnership.

Claudio wanted to understand if the strategy was to divide the work in parallel according to each partner’s experiences, or if they would rather be working collectively. According to Osvaldo, “the work should be collective because *it is a new kind of work, work of a kind that didn't exist before*”, so he thinks that they should create a society (for managing the school). I was intrigued by what he meant by “a new kind of work, a work that didn’t exist before”. Claudio suggested that they create an architecture division, but Osvaldo disagreed: “the architect is not the one who makes the architecture plan anymore – he is rather *the one who puts things into operation*”.

Claudio left for a while – he would return later – and I followed Osvaldo to the place where we were going to meet with Marcello. This was a medieval building, I learned later it is one of the oldest buildings of Turin. The building had been restored with a contemporary look, showing sophisticated design choices and decoration. This place, Osvaldo explained to me while we were waiting for Marcello and Claudio, was a mix of several offices of the company that administrates all of these buildings in the city, owned by the family of Marcello: bars, restaurants, and a hotel just across the street. They have preference for spaces of this kind, he informed me, with historical and architectonic interest, which although they do not offer much profit in a short-term perspective, they prefer them because of the cultural aspect of the buildings. That way “they are doing something which isn't just business, although at the end of the day it is of course business”, he stressed, remarking that even from the commercial point of view, “in the long term it is also a more interesting kind of thing”.

This idea of ‘cultural’ – the ‘immaterial’, informational, communicational aspects of post-Fordist commodities – rather than solely business is well adapted to the specific context of Turin. Turin is perhaps the most post-Fordist city in Italy. It

was once known as the Italian Leningrad due to its intense industrialism – the city of Fiat. However, since the automobile crisis of the late nineties and through campaigns of urban branding, the city has been very active in strategically promoting the image of a creative, ‘cool’ city to attract the ‘creative classes’, thus celebrating ideas of a cultural, post-industrial economy (Vanolo 2008: 370).

After a short visit to the building that was designated for the school, a beautiful eighteenth century hospital<sup>90</sup> just across the street, the interests of those gathered were a little divided and the negotiations began in gusto. Marcello, the owner of the space, was concerned with the management system and was trying to think of who might be interested in funding such a project – stressing however that he would restore the building whether the new school project goes ahead or not. Osvaldo, in turn, was more interested in discussing what the school was going to be beforehand: the questions were whether it should have a more professional type of vocation and teaching practical competences or if it should be something else entirely. It is in this process that the notion of ‘practical competences’ and the view of the designer as “the one who puts things into operation” arise again, becoming the center of the discussion. This notion of practical competences involves a certain degree of improvisation, a way of dealing with unforeseen possibilities (*what can be*, rather than *what is*).

They all agree on excluding the possibility of having product design – it should be something else because “in Turin”, Osvaldo adds, “either we go with the mechanical industry, the car industry, or we go in the direction of a *new industry*” – which they obviously preferred, referring perhaps to the more immaterial ‘creative industries’ in general. However, ‘practical competences’ – the sort of skills required for that ‘new industry’ – do not correspond to the conventional idea of practical skills: “(the idea) is not for *specializing* oneself – as a photographer, cook, etc.”, he stressed, “but like in xxx [the Interaction Design Institute], one learns a diversity of skills”. Marcello and Claudio, though, thought of the new school based precisely on an already assumed notion that design is based on acquiring specialized knowledge. Osvaldo tried to deconstruct this view and convince them of a different view of knowledge, and thus associating ‘the School’ to the project. He wanted to discourage

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<sup>90</sup><http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/37950599.jpg>

his partners from the view that the school would produce experts with technical skills, which he argued is an obsolete conception.

The point, according to Osvaldo, is that in the traditional Italian university system (he was referring to public universities) there is this ‘thinking’ which is often disconnected from the process of ‘doing’, so the alternative in his view could be teaching people *to think while making stuff*: "This was the philosophy of the Interactive Institute, where you wouldn't become a technological ‘expert’, but it would make you able to communicate with the expertise". Responding to this idea, Marcello says that there is a school in Turin which educates young marginalized boys and it works really well – they are taught, for example, how to make pizza or open a bar where they work; others are educated to become sound technicians, etc. Thus, he asks him if this educational model could be transposed to their context. However, for Osvaldo his interlocutors are missing the point: “for the world that we are now living in, it is not important for instance to learn how to make biscuits, what is important is learning to think about a system of *putting that project* (making biscuits) *in practice* in innovative ways”. He gives the example of a student (in ‘the School’) who decided to work on a way of using realistic plastic samples in restaurants, which is very common in Japan where most restaurants have plastic samples of all the items on display, and so this student proposed ways of activating a system like that in Italy. These, he argues, are examples that contrast with the Anglo-Saxon model of school – the one where ‘thinking’ is separated from ‘doing’, emphasizing that "it's not enough to make things and be the best at making those things, but it's more important to invent new ways of *putting those things in practice*. In my opinion, the world is going in this direction", he adds. “But we live in a very specialized world...” retorts Claudio. Osvaldo replies, "We live in a world where making very sophisticated things is not enough; I believe far more than that is needed".

Osvaldo’s vision of the design school and the teaching model he idealizes is articulated with his vision of what the role of the ‘new’ designer adapted to a ‘new’ (economic) world should be, which is concerned with the refashioning of the designer as a flexible-skilled worker, this in turn is related to a different conception of personhood and model of action, a more open-ended one. Another argument he used was that “traditional education privileges skills, which was fine to the world of some decades ago”, however, technical knowledge and specialization do not suffice

nowadays. "For example, when someone develops a camera which downloads directly into You Tube, it's not a question of technical education which is at stake, it's *something different* and so it is important to understand why some are successful and others aren't". This, according to Osvaldo, has to do with *practical competences*, not technical ones.

I was intrigued with this notion of 'practical competences' and so asked him about it later on our way back to the train station. He then offered me the example of Silverio, one of the founders and shareholders of 'the Studio' in Turin. "Silverio is a talented videographer", he says, "but that's the only thing he does: he is good at it and he is very proud of his work but he is not willing to do anything else, which is a very middle-class kind of mentality", he says. I asked him what other things Silverio should do. He gives me an example: the previous year Silverio had been invited by Benedetta's ('the Studio's CEO) husband to make some videos. Benedetta's husband is a very powerful man, not only in political life – he is a center-left senator – but also in media business, he is the owner of very important media groups, and so he needed some videos for *Cofindustria* (the Italian industrial organization). Silverio was invited to make these videos. He made them and it was a success; the senator was very happy with the result. However, Benedetta became furiously angry with Silverio in the end because he was not present at the party where the videos were shown – "he only had to show up, but he didn't care". To Osvaldo the point is that Silverio does not understand that "*in the world that we are living in* that is more important than *doing things well*" – it is more important to be connected to the social networks where opportunities arise. Silverio made his videos well, but his mistake was assuming that the work ends there.

For Osvaldo it is not enough to be the most brilliant mind or the most brilliant expert in certain things, especially in design: "design", he argues, "is all about social skills". Another example he gave me was of a graphic designer they had in 'the Studio' who "was a great graphic designer but she couldn't do anything else", for example, "she hated contacting clients". So she had to leave 'the Studio' because she was not suitable for the job that required those kinds of 'flexible skills'. What these examples have in common is the idea that "the deployment of a single set of skills through the course of a working life" (Sennett 1998: 22) is no longer suitable.

Social skills are understood as the capacity for interaction, for dealing with unpredictable circumstances – in that sense, they are very 'practical'. This notion of

‘practice’ is therefore an embodied, interactive one in the sense that it is meant to be responsive to an environment (Ingold 2000): it is open-ended. These practical, social skills depend on adapting a model (of action) to the world and not the other way around. This is one aspect of the ‘neoliberal flexibility’ that is absent from the accounts of the theoreticians of Post-Fordism and ‘New Economy’ that provide a much more negative account of action, where action is determined by the meta-structures that are inherent to the transformations in the economy (Virno & Hardt 1996; Marazzi 2008; Virno 2004).

I also understood that by ‘practical competences’ Osvaldo refers to a capacity that is more concerned with personal *potential* rather than experience and accumulated knowledge: a capacity that is concerned with process and operation rather than with content. Practical competences, thus, are the opposite of *doing something well* for its own sake – which is what Silverio does. This implies that the sense of a professional career based on technical knowledge and cumulative improvements ends there; it is a thing of the past. To Osvaldo, this kind of profile was “very well suited for the *previous world*” (the world of Fordism, modeled on production, the world of organized capitalism), “but not for the world we are living in”. Practical competences, in this sense, are also against past achievement: they are concerned with exploiting possibilities unforeseen by others. Sennett (2006) describes these possibilities as an ‘ethos of potency’ which becomes dominant within new capitalist culture (and he argues that this ethos is modeled on consumption), where “The talent searcher (...) is less interested in what you already know, more in how much you might be able to learn; the personnel director is less interested in what you already do than in who you might become” (ibid: 156).

Thus, back to the model of school that was being discussed, according to Osvaldo, the aim here is not to educate people to be able to invent great things or be great communicators, but to be able to make things work in the real world, to be able to map problems, to map opportunities. The content of what one knows, in this regard, does not matter – or matters less than what we *may* do with it, potentially – this is the ‘ethos of potency’.

Design is thus refashioned as a form of adapting to the circumstances one encounters and interacting with it.

## Flexible skills

Claudio was easier to convince, he agreed that the model that Osvaldo was proposing was quite interesting but Marcello replied that ultimately what one is dealing with is making products. “In the end one produces services”, Osvaldo retorts. His point is that having ideas does not require any form of specialized knowledge. He thus synthesizes the mainstream ideas associated to creative businesses: Osvaldo already ‘lives in a world’ (that is, in a particularly imagined kind of future) where there is not any labor force nor industrial production involved in the design process, only ideas and consumers of those ideas. Osvaldo, in this sense, is performing post-Fordism by making a distinction between services and products, which is a distinction between immaterial work and material one, that is, post-Fordist from Fordist work, and therefore enacting the idea that the main sources of profits are ideas, rather than material objects (Bauman 2000: 151).<sup>91</sup> Thus, the argument that follows is that people cannot be trained in ‘having good ideas’ as there is not a linear method for producing them. There may be a rational method for creating material objects – the traditional design step by step linear process – but there is not a codified one for producing ideas. That is where his notion of flexible skills comes in.

Referring to the name of the school, to Claudio it "should be clear from the marketing point of view what is it that we are selling, in order to answer to what the market is expecting", but Osvaldo immediately replies that again, he is “thinking in a traditional way”. What they were discussing was thus concerned with the idea of flexible specialization: the post-Fordist idea of flexible specialization of production (also known as Toyotism) is production adapting to the market, instead of the market adapting to production. “Flexible specialization is the antithesis of the system of production embodied in Fordism, where the assembly line is substituted by islands of specialized production” (Sennett 1998: 51). Flexible specialization is business quickly responding to changes in consumer demand. It is adapting production to the demands of consumption – to where the notion of ‘immaterial work’ is situated.

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<sup>91</sup> “The main source of profits – the big profits in particular, and so also of tomorrow’s capital – tend to be, on a constantly growing scale, the *ideas* rather than *material objects*. Ideas are produced only once, and then keep on bringing in wealth depending on the number of people attracted as buyers/clients/consumers – not the number of people hired and engaged in replicating the prototype. When it comes to making the ideas profitable, the objects of competition are the consumers, not the producers. No wonder that the present-day engagement of capital is primarily with the consumers” (Bauman 2000: 151).

When Marcello said that “But we live in a very specialized world...” his reference was the Fordist model of economy, centralized on production. Flexible specialization, by being modeled on consumption rather than production, requires flexible skills.

By saying that Claudio was “thinking in a traditional way” Osvaldo was referring to the typical classificatory specializations people have in mind in reference to a Fordist world and that are based on the idea of specialized knowledge. “There isn't a method”, Osvaldo said, referring to the idea that there is not a very formal design educational program that train people to have good ideas and flexible skills, “but if you expose people to a series of key figures there is a testimonial value”. Osvaldo was suggesting the importance of stimulating a “system of relationships” – he was referring to the idea of having a couple of designers, gurus, who would be invited to teach at the school or giving frequent talks, for example. Very pragmatically, this would be a way not only of transmitting knowledge, but also of *opening possibilities* of contacts and partnerships, he stressed. He was thus extending the post-Fordist logic to the realm of education.

Osvaldo defends this notion of ‘flexible skills’ (he calls it ‘practical competences’) as opposed to specialized knowledge, thus performing the notion of post-Fordist ‘immaterial worker’ (Lazzarato 1996) and the new capitalism ‘ethos of potency’ but with a very practical and quite instrumental purpose: his interest was to involve ‘the School’ in the project. Thus, he himself provides the example of what he intends with ‘practical competences’. Within the ‘market of education’, ‘The School’ is ‘specialized’ precisely in that kind of ‘*practical competences*’ and flexible skills (Chapter 3).

Flexible skills are based on the idea of blurring the modern division between theory and practice – that is why he refers to the Anglo-Saxon model of school as one where ‘thinking’ is separated from ‘doing’, which seems to point to tacit knowledge or embodied skills. Tacit knowledge involves the mobilization of forethought and intuition, the harnessing of non-cognitive resources (Thrift 2008: 35) and the idea that knowing, as a form of practice, is inseparable from doing (Ingold 2000: 316). However, that is not how it is used in this case, where ‘learning by doing’ does not refer to a form of ‘embodied practice’ in the true sense but rather to a way of reverting the modern hierarchy that usually puts theory over practice, instead it positions practice over theory – which, as I outlined in Chapter 3, is an interesting

appropriation of the idea of tacit knowledge. Thus, in the specific sense that is given to it here, flexible skills are closer to the performativity of project management than they are to embodied skills: design shifts from a ‘specialized’ activity (for example in product, fashion, architecture) to a form of ‘orchestration’ of teams and ideas that uses these forms of knowledge as an instrument<sup>92</sup>. It is in this sense that flexible skills are also flexible in a *social* sense: they are, in Osvaldo’s conception, the same thing as ‘social skills’.

## **‘Social skills’: relationships rather than content; and practice rather than theory**

It is quite interesting that Osvaldo’s vision of ‘practical competences’/flexible skills is almost synonymous with ‘social skills’ – he often shifts between ‘practical’ and ‘social’ skills. In the previous sections, I have showed how this combined notion is concerned with a restructured (immaterial) worker; the designer is a manager of social *relations*. As Lazzarato puts it,

“The activities of this kind of immaterial labor force us to question the classic definitions *of work* and *workforce*, because they combine the results of various different types of work skill: intellectual skills, as regards the cultural-informational content; manual skills for the ability to combine creativity, imagination, and technical and manual labor; and entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations and the structuring of that social cooperation of which they are a part. This immaterial labor constitutes itself in forms *that are immediately* collective, and we might say that it exists only in the form of networks and flows.” (Lazzarato 1996: 4; author’s Italics).

By the end of my fieldwork Osvaldo invited me to participate in another project. He had been in charge of the BA in design at ‘the School’ for three years now, and his superiors wanted him to propose a MA to follow this BA. There was already one Master’s in Product Design, but they wanted to create a new one under Osvaldo’s tutelage. He invited me to help him with shaping the proposal. The

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<sup>92</sup> Project management has been one of the strategies included in the attempt to extend the signature of the commodity, according to Nigel Thrift (2008: 38): “More and more companies are becoming like project coordinators, outsourcing the ‘business-as-usual’ parts of their operations so that they can be left free to design and orchestrate new ideas, aided by new devices like product life-cycle software which allow product designs to be rapidly changed. Nike, for instance, does not make shoes anymore; it manages footwear projects. Coca-cola, which hands most of the bottling and marketing of its drinks to others, is little more than a collection of projects, run by people it calls ‘orchestrators’ (...) For all these firms, project management has become an important competitive tool. Some of them call it a core competence” (*The Economist* 2005c: 66, quoted in *ibid.*)

conversations were already on going, partially through e-mail, which he would frequently forward me. These emails detailed a discussion between the Director of ‘the School’ (I will call her Mrs. Gentile, who proposed the creation of a Masters in Exhibition Design) and Osvaldo, who was attempting to convince ‘the Schools’ hierarchy that a course in Community Design was preferable. Mrs. Gentile, he told me, represents “‘the other side’, people who are above him and who are organized but not very self-confident”.

**Osvaldo – to me:**

there has been a request,  
‘the school’ wants to do an MA in exhibition design.

this makes sense,  
exhibition design is the thing i know best  
and it has good marketing value.

still,  
i am trying to convince them not to do an MA in exhibition because it is conceptually obsolete.

i am trying to convince them  
that an MA in social design (or design for the communities or whatever name we want to give it)  
would be much better.

(e-mail, 09-06-2009)

When I asked him why he thought that exhibition design is conceptually obsolete, he explained to me that it is “because the world does not anymore have a specific need for exhibition designers” and that “design with communities is much more intriguing”. Then I tried to understand what did he meant by ‘design with communities’ – I wanted to know if he had in mind collaborative projects or participatory design and how does that relate with his designer-centered conception of innovation, collaboration and the conviction that “if we only gave people what they want, we would still live in caves”. I wanted to understand if was he thinking of an idea of empowering the community (*designing with*), or if he rather means *designing for* the community.

The negotiation, though, was about ‘a new conception of designer’, rather than the notion of ‘community’. This new notion of designer is implicit in the relationship established with the notion of ‘community’ and the particular representations about it. In this sense the example illustrates that it is not the content that matters for Osvaldo, what matters is the new professional opportunities that this

combination may open for designers. Potential ability, the ideal trait of a worker in the cutting edge institution that Osvaldo so vigorously defends, is strategic and operational, content-free. In that sense, 'working with communities' is referred to as a form of management practice of co-ordination – close to the idea of 'orchestration' that I mention above. He sent the relevant parties a proposal to shift from 'exhibition design' into a different subject and in this proposal he does refer to 'design for communities'.

good morning everyone,  
here's a thought about the design biennium.

assuming that it would be ok to have a product biennium,  
at the moment the other biennium we are talking about is the exhibition one.

obviously,  
it's for me very easy and simple to imagine a biennium in exhibition design (since exhibition is broadly speaking the thing that I do best).

nevertheless,  
I would ask [Mrs. Gentile] to check the feasibility of imagining a hypothetical biennium with the provisional title:

"design for communities"

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in previous days I've been to England,  
between London and Cornwall,  
because of a stunning project from the English design council in collaboration with the Cornwall regional government (with money from the EU).

it's a project all around community and about how design may interact with the community and the ways the world can be transformed using design in this new way.

which is by the way the same subject approached the previous year in Turin with Geo-design<sup>93</sup>,  
and not too far away from the subject of our work in the services plan for the city of Milan<sup>94</sup> (which is concerned with the third sector, subsidiarity [*subsidiarietà*], etc.)

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assuming that from the ministerial point of view (and from marketing etc.etc.etc.),  
something like this could be accepted,

there are obvious strong points:

- a) it is a crucial and substantial subject within contemporary design debate
- b) it is perfectly in line with 'the school's' profile and related to where 'the school' wants to position itself in regard to the social and economic present-day context
- c) it's clear and easy to explain

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<sup>93</sup> This was an example of a community-design project where he had been previously involved.

<sup>94</sup> Referring to a project in 'the studio' called PGT (Milan's *Government Territory Plan/ Piano di Governo del Territorio*) that I discuss further in this chapter.

d) being the first to do it, we wouldn't have any other competitors (with all the advantages concerned). [...]

More than being focused on the 'communities' or what 'community' is, it is the conception of the designer which is at stake here. His idea was to explore a new way of doing design, with the argument that there are now other challenges to the traditional way where the designer worked for a company or an institution. It is the whole relationship between design and money that changed with the crisis. His argument was that 'designing with communities' requires a new design professional with broader and transversal competences beyond the sectorialization that design has traditionally been ascribed.

in the previous world,  
the designer was that gentleman who designs things that common people use

in today's world,  
the designer is that gentleman (or that lady), who together with several groups of people (communities of practices),  
gives shape to needs and desires more or less latent and/or expressed.

designing a street performance festival, games for children in the park,  
a car-sharing service, the little house that later becomes the headquarters of the neighborhood bowling team

from this point of view,  
one is talking about a new professional.  
the designer understood as a facilitator of processes,  
that guy who enables groups of people to develop their own projects in the best way possible.

In his view, the idea of a designer who works *for* a community (and he adds in brackets "or *with* a community") corresponds to an orchestration of relationships that brings different possibilities and opportunities for the younger generation of designers. He also argues that the work available for exhibition design, in the end, is more readily assumed by generalists, architects, who usually get better jobs than their colleagues in interior design, so he thinks "it's wiser to explore these niches" than entering into competition with the public universities that educate architects to work on the more traditional design areas.

The idea of 'community', however, was the point of controversy. Both myself and his interlocutors in 'the School' were focused on the content of the word 'community', discussing if he was using a 'right' or 'wrong' concept of community, bounded or unbounded, exclusive or inclusive, high or low, elitist or non-elitist.

However, to Osvaldo the notion of ‘community’ was not the point. He insists that what matters to him is *not the medium*; it does not matter to him whether the medium is product design, new technologies, fashion design, exhibition design or interior design:

“what I’m interested in discussing with you is the possibility a space for this idea of a new design professional who is able to become a “facilitator”: the designer together with a community of people develops project x, which from time to time, can be turned into the form of product, service, exhibition, performance, etc. (in respect to the needs/desires of a given community) [...] in a world where a great deal of solutions arrive vertically from top to bottom, the idea is that it would be better to have a designer who works from the bottom upwards” (e-mail, my translation).

‘Community’, in Osvaldo’s conception was thus just another medium of action along with the others, where obviously the active element is the designer – the design-centered conception of innovation is not in question.

In parallel to his discussion with the people in ‘the School’, I was quipping with his idea of ‘social design’, arguing that all design is social, as well as the argument that traditional design used to be the one for ‘normal people’ whereas the ‘new professional’ would work for ‘communities’. I asked him why the dichotomy and how would he define ‘normal’ people:

normal people are normal people.

community, in this frame  
could be defined as a group of normal people who get together because of a need and/or desire.

it can be about football,  
feeding the poor,  
building a fence to define a boundary  
parents of children who go to the same school  
religious and so on.

a community is a group of common people who share the same interests

(e-mail, 10-06-2009).

Thus, he defines ‘community’ in a purely pragmatic way, as just the association of people for common goals, as a means-to-ends relationship. So I realized that his distinction was not between ‘normal people’ *versus* the designer but rather between *groups* of normal people (that he considers communities) *versus* the designer – a question of degree. Actually, one of the expressions he used in the course of our discussion on this topic was that

western civilization moves on because of intellectuals, technologists, researchers and so on.  
if it was up to communities we would still live in caves.

Thus, the design-centered approach to innovation that is based on the centrality of the agency of the designer is here reproduced – what is new here is the combination of a design-centered innovation with an interactive, practical and open-ended approach to design skills.

that said,  
the communities can provide an incredible contribution to the improvement of the quality of our life.

without scientists and intellectuals we don't go to the moon.  
without good communities, life in our town is [rubbish].

both are necessary.

(e-mail, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009)

So he uses the idea of redefining the designer as a 'facilitator' (a concept that I suggested in our exchange of ideas) as a way of emptying out design skills from any form of content in the theoretical form – his argument that the designer does not need to be an expert in community issues (as much as she/he does not need to specialize in product or exhibition design). His/her role is rather a *relational* one, not only in the social sense – and therefore his idea of 'social skills' as the capacity to articulate people in networks, projects and teams – but also in a 'practical' one, that is, in the sense of making new combinations where new outcomes can potentially arise. But paradoxically, there is the idea that the medium (here, the community) is neutral in the relationship, that it does not have agency.

With a 'relational' role, the 'designer as a facilitator' is thus just a node in the network: this is the redefinition he is trying out, which is something that confirms broader ideas about 'new work' in the new capitalist system, where "[w]ork is not a possession, nor does it have a fixed content, but becomes instead a position in a constantly changing network. A network node – that curiously content-free word used in management-speak – differs from an office in Max Weber's sense" (Sennett 2006: 140). This implies shifting the design skill from any form of content, such as academic subjects or specialized skills, or theoretical disciplines to a more 'practical' one where those contents become rather instrumental, reduced to the status of mere technical 'information' or technical competences thus inverting the existing

hierarchy between theory and practice to one where practice dominates. Thus, as Osvaldo expresses,

“...instead of teaching people how to design a bar, (it is more interesting) to teach them how to relate with the group of people that would be happy to organize themselves to manage a bar; [...] it is not designing a bar understood as a physical enclosure, but rather to design a bar as a social space, together with whom uses this bar. [...] If we want to teach people how to design a bar, the skills needed for that is already common currency: lighting, plans, color theory, materials, etc. If we want to teach people how to work with the community who wants to organize itself around a bar, the skills, although not formalized, are obvious enough: managing capacity, fast prototyping, visualizing capacity, economic aspects, management of group dynamics of heterogeneous work, practical skills, etc., etc.” (e-mail, my translation from Italian).

Interaction – and the conception of relationality that is being enacted here – is thus reduced to pure operation, articulation, connection, but not as a form of phenomenological relationship – which resembles the same critiques that are often addressed to actor-network theories, for example, for their absence of emotion and embodied aspects (Laurier & Philo 1999; Oppenheim 2007: 477) or the tendency to retain a distance from the lives of the people they are focused on (Knox *et al* 2006: 127). This is the point Tim Ingold (2007) makes: the idea that making links between nodes, moving from point to point is distinguished from the more embodied, lived activity of making threads and trails. The former is concerned with planning, with what the mind does, while the latter is concerned with travel, with an embodied trajectory. The paradox that I am pointing out here is that an open-ended conception of action is thus restricted to the conception of the designer as an agent, but it is not extended to what he/she interacts with. Thus, what is being deployed here is something akin to an actor-network theory of action but without the extension of the agency to the domain of materiality (the non-human) or, in other words, deprived of its ‘distributed phenomenology’ (Oppenheim 2007: 473).

Osvaldo’s conception of the designer as *a new professional*, however, was not consensual; it was something that he had to negotiate through their discussion. In Mrs. Gentile’s view, a Master’s course in Community Design would be funded by public government, whereas they work rather in the realm of market. Also, a proposal like that would need a research center in social studies, which ‘the School’ does not have. He replies that “perhaps yes, just as much as an undergraduate course in product or textile design would require the presence of a center of textile studies, and so on”; “all in all, being trained as a designer, I have this limit of imagining the

relationship between analysis and project always reversed (it is never the analysis that leads the project, but it is the project which leads the analysis)”, he said. This statement (that I have already mentioned in the previous chapter) is a very clear example of how he reverses the priority of practice over theory, therefore inverting the tendency he criticizes (the model of school and of learning where ‘thinking’ is separated from ‘doing’), transforming it in its negative (where ‘doing’ is more important than ‘thinking’), but still the separation is maintained. “My idea is that ‘the School’ does not have it in its DNA to become a research center. What we can do is to develop projects, frames, situations where it becomes easy to intersect and overlap with existing research centers” (e-mail 09-10-2009; my translation from Italian). The paradox is that it is precisely an open-ended conception of action that is thus used for reproducing a modern purification (Latour 1993a) between design agency (the only one that counts) and the ‘world’ (as a patient of that agency) (Gell 1998), or a particular form of political prioritization of the ‘inside’-agency over the ‘outside’-passiveness.

## **Design as a form of management**

The idea that ‘social skills’ are ‘practical skills’ is also concerned with the performativity of design as a form of management (Osvaldo puts management above the academic traditional of specialized skills), and being a form of management, it is also a way of articulating networks of possibilities, openness and potential. This relates to the capitalist pursuit of potential and obsession with future possibilities, working on ‘what can be’ rather than ‘what is’, against old formalist ways that base the profession on technical skills and specialized knowledge (such as exhibition design) and career-making (that by its turn are based on the more fixed and content-based specialized knowledge). “In other words, *value* increasingly arises not from what is but from what is not yet but can potentially become, that is from the *pull of the future*, and from the new distributions of the sensible that can arise from that change” (Thrift 2008: 31).

At a certain point, someone from the group suggested that what Osvaldo proposes is very much in line with what in any sort of market oriented management

is defined as “the construction of a system of market supply”. Osvaldo stresses that that this is exactly the point: “there you go, let’s say that I’m speaking about a world where the final aim is not established by the project leader designer, but it is established by the group of people to which the good/service/whatever is intended for. [For instance,] the final aim of what ‘the School’s bar should be is not established by an abstract board or the office of the Convention of *Bastogi* (an Italian company in the catering industry) but rather the people that use ‘the School’s’ bar everyday. [...] the idea on the basis of a biennium of this kind is that the design skills underlying the delegation of the consumer group would be significantly diverse from the design skills underlying the delegation of the administrator of a company (or of a public institution)”.

The concept of market supply, quasi-market, or *subsidiarietà* is associated with the idea of governance, the third sector, which implies managing networks. So another idea is that the designer is reconfigured as someone who does not work for the world of production anymore, but rather for an ‘immaterial economy’ of management of social networks of *flexible* government (*subsidiarietà*, third sector) – and therefore the stress is on the need to work from the base (‘communities’) rather than from a top-down perspective. This was precisely the philosophy of PGT – *Piano di Governo del Territorio* (Government Territory Plan), the master-plan of the city council of Milan (Comune di Milano). ‘The Studio’ had been selected to work on this project – specifically on the plan of services. This is one of the projects in which the designers of ‘the Studio’ were most proud of, as it represents a new area on which designers had not worked before: services, urban planning, and community development; and also because this is one of the projects where this view of the ‘new design professional’ was being put in practice.

Although I will not enter into details about this project here, I would like to highlight two aspects that are relevant to the aims of this thesis: the first being the self-proclaimed idea that this project inverted a modernist approach where plans determined needs, to an alternative model where needs determine the plans. “In modern times there was a service, for example a hospital, and people used it. Now it’s different: they (planners) try to understand what the needs are and plan those services according to those needs”, Osvaldo explained. Thus, the project is an example of a process that concerns adapting a model to the world instead of the world to a model – similarly to the way that Osvaldo caricatured my presence in

the field. This shift, however, is only rhetorical in the sense they substitute a quantitative approach – “where planners calculated the number of material infrastructures divided for each area/neighborhood” – to an approach based on categories and maps of categories which allows them to say that they shifted to a qualitative one. The approach, however, is still a macro approach based on representations – the only difference is that it substitutes one mode of representation (numbers) for another (graphic visual categories) – a considerable part of the work of ‘the Studio’ in this project was producing these visual categories and to work on the several forms of communication that it involved.

The second aspect that I want to highlight, and the more salient aspect regarding the purpose of this chapter, is the way ‘the Studio’ – actually Osvaldo – was chosen by the local government for this project. The reason he was chosen, he explained to me, was precisely because of being ‘inexperienced’ and ‘neutral’. There were other experts with more substantial experience in public services but they did not want them. He explained that the reason he had been selected, they informed him, was because more experienced professionals in urban planning would have to ‘unlearn’ what they know – leaving their specialized skills in urban planning behind. The other reason was that they wanted someone who would “get along with everyone” in the project. These reasons illustrate the emptying out of the role of knowledge and the introduction of the idea of ‘facilitator of processes’. That is how the new capitalist management culture is performed, based on neutral ‘cooperation’, where knowledge, seniority, specialization and personal achievements are not considered virtues anymore. It is in this sense that knowledge becomes a relational capacity, a matter of flexible, social, practical skills, something concerned with future, virtual possibilities – with ‘what can be’ rather than ‘what is’. It is also in this sense that ‘practice’ substitutes ‘theory’ – it does not matter the content of what one learns, it does not matter about specialization nor careers, what matters is the potential that relational capacities afford. Osvaldo’s job in this project as a leader of ‘the Studio’ is that of a collaborator, a mediator, a facilitator, a manager of processes and therefore the role needs to be deprived of content – and this is a way of putting management over other (not less practical) areas of knowledge. What matters here is not really expertise (technical skills, cumulative knowledge, and progressive careers) but management capacity. The importance is put on the relationships of communication rather than the facts communicated. In other words, the ideal

neoliberal worker is a ‘networker’. Other ‘virtues’ are more valued: relational capacity, ‘soft skills’ (Thrift 2005; 2008; Sennett 1998): leadership in ‘teamwork’ promoting ‘collaboration’. Regarding modern management techniques, Sennett accounts for how in ‘teamwork’ power is neutralized, “the powerful only ‘facilitate’, enable others” (Sennett 1998: 109), the boss is apparently equal to others, because “[t]he game of power is being played by the team against teams in other companies” (ibid: 111).

Oswaldo embodies the ‘networker’ – he uses the network as a design for action (Knox *et al* 2006)<sup>95</sup>: he is a strong node in networks such as that of PGT, because he moves very effectively in this world where the notion that ‘post-Fordism is the future’ is paramount; he performs the new capitalist ideal subject. But again, the relational is reduced to the mere connection.

Curiously, once I followed Oswaldo to one of those meetings with the city council where I was a little bit unsettled because I did not understand much of what they were talking about, I could not understand what was the content of the discussion, what was being decided and what was the role of Oswaldo there – there were a lot of maps of Milan, some mapping existing services, others mapping possible services. But I had the impression that nothing happened. By the end of it, Oswaldo confirmed to me that nothing really happened and that is normal: “it’s just a way of keeping contact. This is all about creating consensus, so it requires getting along with all the people”, and that is precisely one of the reasons why, in his opinion, the most important skill of the designer is to keep going with the project, that it is in this sense that “social skills are the most basic skills of a designer” and that in this regard, “the myth of the genius individual creator is a lie”<sup>96</sup>.

These are the ‘social skills’ that Oswaldo talks about almost as a matter of sheer survival, social skills that are more important than building a career based on cumulative achievements, they are a matter of ‘practical’ improvisation, of responding to the situations as they arise. Sennett also explains that within this culture of celebrated flexibility, as a person’s experience and knowledge accumulates, it loses value (ibid: 94). That is why, paradoxically, Oswaldo is valuable

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<sup>95</sup> I am not using ‘the network’ as a descriptive, analytical nor methodological device, but rather I am referring to the uses/performativity of a specific notion of network (Knox *et al* 2006) in order to highlight what kinds of relationalities matter to the subjects that I analyze.

<sup>96</sup> See also Jiménez (2008) idea on the ‘economies of repetition’: the idea that the organizational ‘cultures of innovation’ are often a matter of repetition. He caricatures his work as a ‘knowledge manager’ as simply that of someone who repeats the very same words and messages through Power Point presentations throughout meetings.

to this project precisely because of his inexperience wherefrom his potential flexibility arises, and rendering this condition his strategic element of competition among other candidates. Returning to an instance I spoke of earlier in this chapter, that is why he depicted Veronica's concerns about career and life as obsolete.

In sum, all of these ideas – of flexible skills, social skills, management of networks, designer as a facilitator – contrast with the paradigmatic example of Silverio, the talented videographer who is not adapted to the 'new world of work' because he is only able to do just that. He is not proficient in management or social skills. He is not 'flexible'. Silverio's example is rather paradigmatic of a Fordist notion of career as cumulative achievement (qualification, experience, technical skills and specialized knowledge). All of these values and views of subjecthood are being substituted for more 'flexible' ones, the "endless becoming, a selfhood which is never finished" (Sennett 1998: 123). This is, in other words, a world being modeled on the idea of fluidity and networks: ideas that are both descriptors and local metaphors (Knox *et al* 2006) in the sense that they do not just describe the world, but are also embodied and performed by actors within the world described.

## **Conclusion: the modern post-modern**

To Osvaldo, everywhere there are 'conservative' people he has to 'evangelize', preparing them for change: people that "cannot live in a new world thinking the old way", to use an expression of his. First it was me, who was 'conservative' in regards to an inflexible, static and bounded model of people/work, expecting people to be bounded to an office or a company but it is not how it works in design; then Veronica was 'conservative' in terms of a model of life that also belongs to the past generations; Osvaldo's friends, entrepreneurs from Turin were 'conservative' in terms of a model of market that does not work anymore; his superiors in 'the School' were conservative in their belief in a model of knowledge and education, unable to understand what the role of the designer is and the flexible skills he/she requires in order to adapt to a flexible economic world. This is the fantasy of a world where people cannot hold on to things anymore – careers, specialized qualifications, knowledge – that is being performed, a fantasy where

what matters is rather the flexibility that relational possibilities afford, which requires an open-ended model of action and personhood. These are some of the specific ways Osvaldo performs his visions about change in the world of work.

Seen from an ethnographic point of view, flexibility, though, has an ambivalent power: it is not just something imposed from the outside as part of some capitalism's Leviathan; flexibility is rather both 'part of the system' and performed in daily life as a good thing. Departing from a conversation between Osvaldo and a younger collaborator in 'the Studio', in the first section of the chapter I described the dilemma designers' face when trying to be autonomous professionals, illustrating the way designers imagine they live in an open network rather than cohesive, bounded community, as free and autonomous self-entrepreneurs. But flexibility in terms of work insecurity and the uncertainty it creates, generates anxiety and, and in that regard, Veronica's example is paradigmatic of the sense of drift people feel in terms of labor and careers when having to deal with constant change: the impossibility of building a career; the impossibility of designing a life.

The 'flexibilization of skills', however, is the way Osvaldo imagines not only of dealing with the uncertainty of this professional world and a way of managing how to live in it, how to survive in it, but as a matter of extracting potential from it.

The aim of this chapter has been to show that the performative/dramatized aspect of innovation that I have been highlighting throughout this thesis also involves the use/performativity of an open-ended notion of action and personhood – a notion that is enacted by the use of an idea of flexibility, namely flexible skills. Flexible skills are a matter of improvisation rather than planning. Thus, in the second section I described how flexibility is performed through the vision of a 'new design professional' referring to situations where Osvaldo convinces others of his conception of 'social skills'. The 'social skills' that Osvaldo talks about are the skills to work in the fluid, flexible world, where content does not matter, what matters is potential articulations, networks, links, connections.

Social skills are about the articulation of unpredictable possibilities with what is at hand: it is more like a game capacity, playing, than really being knowledgeable about a certain subject or dominating certain techniques. The idea of 'working with communities' is detached from any form of content (communal identities, social bonds, for example) to become material of design orchestration. 'Working with communities' is not about any form of content: what matters is not 'the community'

as such, nor what community means or whom the community is composed of, it is a sort of articulation capacity. This is where the network metaphor comes in. The idea of ‘building a career’ is being substituted by that one of social skills, flexible skills and therefore, to work with networks. In that sense, the idea of ‘community’ is seen as a medium, just another form of networking – networks as relational activity (deprived from content) suggest a break between possibilities and reality, an imposition of ‘what can be’ over ‘what is’. Emptying out the medium from content (and also agency capacity) is, thus, one of the many ways described in this thesis of actualizing a process equivalent to the well-known McLuhan’s (1964) maxim “the medium is the message”. What matters is working with communities as if with any other medium (technology, visual media, whatever), neutralizing its relational effects – which is expressed in the idea of being a facilitator, whereby design becomes a form of management, orchestration, rather than creation. However, if the community is seen as a neutral medium, with no agency recognized in change, it is the designer (despite being an orchestrator rather than a single creator) who is still seen as the sole agent of innovation – it is in this sense that Osvaldo performs the contradictions of a ‘new capitalist’ conception of action, for it is a conception that mixes and combines in strange ways post-modern ideas with modern ones. The ‘ethos of potency’ that his conception of a ‘new professional designer’ illustrates, despite the open-ended view of subjecthood that is associated with it, ends up being a conservative way of performing a design tradition because it reproduces a design-centered conception of agency, and, indeed, innovation: if on the one hand, there is the idea that the design capacities may be flexible and based on improvisation, on the other hand, other agencies in the process are not recognized as having a creative role – the idea that ‘communities’ are a medium to work with (the designer as a facilitator) but are not recognized as ‘potential’ innovators, not even active elements contributing to the creative process.

## **Conclusion: a contribution to a relational approach to innovation**

The ‘new economy’, in formation since the 1990's, has been a particularly imagined future based on the promise that ‘new media’ would present a new industrial revolution (Edgerton 2006). Despite the fact that it did not produce large increases of productivity (Thrift 2005: 10), its promoters “projected that the IT economy would transcend many of the limitations of the old, industrial age of capitalism that it promised to supersede” (Marez 2009: 473). Although with a very specific generative center – Silicon Valley, California – and despite being full of contradictions (ibid.), the ‘euphoric fantasies’ of the ‘new economy’ have had widespread effects in the world of ‘new media’, as it is the case of Interaction Design, also part of the ‘new media hype’ of the ‘new economy’.

Associated with the ‘new economy’ are also ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘immaterial labor’ (Lazzarato 1996; 1994; Virno 2001; 2004), ‘affective labor’ (Hardt 1999) and post-Fordism more generally, which, like the ‘new economy’, are associated to a projection of a dematerialized world: the promise that the post-industrial western world would produce ideas, immaterial things, and that ideas have more value than material things – with the implicit assumption that one part of the world would produce ‘intellectual’ work while the other part would produce the more taken-for-granted material commodities that are necessary to support the ‘immaterial’ work of the other side. This optimistic outlook existed before the economic crisis, it was a specific myth of progress.

This ethnography illustrates this ‘myth of progress’ from the point of view of the designers of an Interaction Design studio in Italy, where I conducted my fieldwork; these designers perform this narrative through the idea that fictions, stories, ideas, and immaterial aspects are now more important than material production. If the ‘enchantment of innovation’ (Jiménez 2008) is associated with this myth, how is it expressed? And what sort of effects did the financial crisis of 2008, with its enormous economic and social impact in Italy (and many other European countries), have on this narrative?

I realized that this narrative, this myth of progress, was still open. As I detail

in the chapter ‘The Studio’, interaction design was a sort of ‘abandoned future’ in Italy, and thus I entered the field when designers were somehow mourning its loss – some of these designers still believed in Interaction Design, while others simply saw it as a thing of the past. Design-as-fiction is the narrative that substitutes the dream that Interaction Design once was. In this context, ‘the Studio’ was in the process of adapting to ‘more conventional’ kinds of work – Interaction Design no longer defines ‘the Studio’. And the promise that the future would produce ‘fictions’ also faded away.

Coming mostly from a background in art and architecture, for these designers there is no ontological distinction between representation and reality – that is why one of the main figures of the ethnography, Osvaldo, says so determinately that “they create context”, or that “they create realities” – and so what is generative from their point of view, is the notion that working with representation is the same as working with reality. Overall, this non-distinction legitimizes the idea that at the end it is all representation anyway, so they work on representations (such as representations of knowledge about places, about knowledge processes in general, and projections about needs and desires) as if that is the same thing as working with reality; and thus, the idea is that they have total control over representations as they are a product of their own agency. This is a performance of a modern concept of agency, a particular rational model of action that is detached from the embeddedness of situated actions (Suchman 1987), an embeddedness that even language requires (*ibid*: 58). The ethnography details some of the processes and contradictions concerned with specific relationships between representations (or the imagined; the planned model of action) and the world (or improvised; the unintended consequences and chance); it details the coexistence of these different models of action.

What changed is not that designers now work with representations as this is what design always did: what changed is that the design-centered model of innovation is being adapted to new conditions where designers find new reasons to work with representations. Thus, the influences from conceptual art, conceptual design, post-structuralism, post-modernism, do not signify a shift from a modern conception of action to a new one – which is the thesis of Bruno Latour (2008) – rather, they are used by designers to reproduce modern concepts of action where the only agency that counts is that of the designer – a design-centered view of innovation.

## **The absence of a notion of external reality in design**

In contrast to some of the main approaches to design and innovation, mine was an embodied kind of process, an ‘experience-near’ process (Geertz 1974) based on constant questioning that differed from other methods, based more on a distant and disembodied kind of observation (Yaneva 2009, Latour 2005, Suchman 1987). I was bodily immersed in a world that was strange to me, and it was through this relationship, with its generative tensions and always emergent misunderstandings that I learned most.

Through the ethnographic writing process, I ended up mirroring some of the processes that I learned about design, thus drawing strongly on my subjectivity to generate knowledge – which can be seen as a way of ‘internalizing the outside’ that I describe in chapter 4. In that sense, just like the design processes that I describe, my ethnography somehow indexes the agency on the part of the (ethnographic) author (Leach 2011). I used my personal, subjective and often conflictual, sometimes ‘idiotic’ (Michael 2012a; 2012b) engagements with the design situations in a generative way. Reflexivity, however, in itself is nothing new. Actually, the reflexive character of ethnographic analysis means that “ethnography is not only about the culture under study but equally, implicitly or explicitly, about the cultural perspective from which it is written and that of the audience to whom is presented” (Dourish & Bell 2011: 69). It is however this particular kind of ‘idiotic’ reflexivity afforded by the ethnographic engagement that is one of the ways in which this thesis aims to contribute to STS and ANT accounts of innovation that usually provide a more distant and abstract account of the lives of the people they are focused on (see Knox *et al* 2006: 127). It was through this specific kind of ‘idiotic reflexivity’ and the potential relational affordances it allows that I *performed* the new in ethnographic terms: the performativity of the new that this thesis is concerned with involves also this aspect of the relationality of the embodied researcher with her/his fieldwork practicing the production of the new in his/her own terms. This is because I learned in the field, and therefore reproduced, the idea that the performativity of innovation is *relational*. Relationality, thus, ends up being relativized in the ethnographic

process.

Seeing the performativity of innovation as something *relational* does not simply mean that innovators phenomenologically interact with the world with which they deal: it means relativizing our own assumptions on what relationality is. Overall, in my own process of questioning I was constantly expecting to find a *relationship* with an external reality and I ended up realizing that there was no external reality for these designers, there is no communication with the ‘outside’ world because the distinction itself does not make sense to them. In other words, what is *relational* to them means a different thing than what it meant to me as an ethnographer. So I learned that the world of design is, quite self-referentially, the design world. For instance, in chapter 1, which outlined a project that involved a map of Milan that marked design interventions around the city, I was expecting to find out what the map referred to and how the public would use it and react to it. I came to the conclusion that there was no public in mind apart from other designers – so what the map *represents*, is literally what the map *is*; a map that refers to itself. Also, in chapter 2, I accounted the process around the creation of an object inside a fiction, which, contrary to my expectations, did not develop into a ‘conceptual’ object/product for the market, it remained as an idea and a performance piece at a design competition. I then realized that what matters for these designers is the ‘inside’ (self-referential) world of representation. This was also the focus of chapter 3, which is an account of an exercise where design students used ‘participant observation’, a method that I introduced them to. I was surprised to find that design students used their fieldwork diaries in unexpected ways: rather than instruments of description within the observation process – as active elements of the process – the diaries were rather constructed afterwards, as finished objects. I learned that in these processes, the representation is the description; the description does not refer to an ‘outside’ world but to an internalized process of interpretation/representation.

In these processes of representation that involve a relationship with the world, what matters to designers is the way the relationship is processed internally and thus the object should stand for the author’s/designer’s creativity (and therefore, agency) rather than other – external, interactive – factors: be it people, public, communities, or places. Observing the place or observing people is transformed into an internalized process of creativity, which was the focus of Chapter 4. A good expression of this is the concept of ‘intellectual encompassment’, an idea that I

borrowed from James Leach (2007), which I used to describe my participation in a workshop where ‘the place’ was supposed to be processed internally and come out as an ‘artistic interpretation’ rather than representation, and thus the objects we were going to produce in this workshop should stand for each author’s individualized agency.

What these examples revealed to me was that a phenomenological notion of interaction is something foreign to the creative process. The reason for this is concerned with a specific understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.

## **The relationship between theory and practice**

According to Tim Ingold, the separation between theory and practice has its origin in technology, which has forced a division between subject and object, and therefore between knowledge and practice. Thus, while skill is tacit and context dependent, “(t)echnological knowledge, by contrast, is explicit rather than tacit, objective rather than subjective, context-independent rather than context-dependent, discursive rather than practical” (2000: 316). I learned that although these designers defend ‘learning-by-doing’ forms of education and practical hands-on activities or experimental prototypes, when using them they are not defending tacit forms of learning or knowledge (Polanyi 1969): they use them to produce meanings over concrete contexts, conceptuality over situated practices, therefore reproducing the dichotomy between theory and practice that ‘practical learning’ is supposed to abolish, but reproducing it in an inverted form. Practical learning, based on ‘practice theory’, offers “a radical break with the Cartesian tradition of separating ideas and the real world, learning and doing, experts and lay persons, knowledge and practice” (Pálsson 1994: 904). But what I found in fieldwork were ways in which a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach is used to produce symbolic, conceptual objects based on a process of internalized creativity (Leach 2007), which is the opposite of what practical approaches to learning claim (Polanyi 1969; Lave 1991; Pálsson 1994; Hutchins 1993; 1995; Ingold 2000; Gunn 2004; 2009a; 2009b). Through ‘learning by doing’ designers reproduce a division between the ‘practical’ and the ‘intellectual’.

Their use of ‘learning-by-doing’ also suggests a way of using ‘practical education’ as an opposition to ‘theoretical’ education without really engaging in forms of tacit or embodied learning. This is more evident in the design exercises that I describe in ‘the School’ (chapters 1 and 4), where the relationship with contexts and people is often absent from the design processes and represented knowledge about places substitutes actual knowledge of places; and thus practice and hands-on experimentation are used as an opposition to theory (chapter 3). Even though Interaction Design was somehow an ‘abandoned future’ for ‘the Studio’, the reification of technological knowledge remains, in the sense that Ingold formulated, as a modern form of separation between theory and practice, mind and body. This separation, however, is not opposed to, but is deeply concerned with an open-ended view of action. Modern views of innovation centered in design agency and open-ended views of action actually coexist. The adventurous model of action, based on improvisation and exploration rather than planning in advance, is thus not the opposite of audacious creation, as ANT defends, but it is what feeds it.

Thus, for instance in chapter 5, I analyze how flexibility is substituting the notion of career in design, and specifically, how ‘flexible skills’ are used for substituting cumulative knowledge and achievements. A new type of design work is imagined as a form of network management, where the ‘new’ designer is understood as a facilitator of processes. That is considered a ‘practical’ role, but the way it is ‘practical’ is not in a phenomenological sense: the new role imagined for the designer is not as one who engages with the world and is transformed by it. The idea of network, as well as ‘community’, as I show through the examples, is understood as just a (neutral) medium for the (practical) agency of the designer. Design-centered conceptions of agency are thus reproduced in new circumstances that are concerned with the reconfiguration of the designer within a context of crisis. This deployment of ‘flexibility’, on the one hand suggests a different model of action, based more on improvisation in what refers to the design of one’s trajectory and life-narrative; it also suggests an openness to transformation. However, on the other hand, it is concerned with ways of reproducing a modern dichotomy between practice and theory, body and mind, but again, in an inverted way: that is, a way of privileging ‘practice’ over ‘theory’.

So the paradox is that on one side, there is the idea that innovation processes are not linear or explicit: the idea that *new* ideas do not emerge as explicit

requirements/needs, but rather through much more tacit and unpredictable processes – this is where the ‘enchantment’ of innovation (Jiménez 2008) lies. However, on the other side, designers prioritize the ideological, fictional, symbolic matters (the world ‘inside’) over interaction: this is because interaction presupposes an ‘outside’ and there is not such a notion of inside/‘outside’ in design; representation, in design, is self-referential. It is, in this sense, a conception of innovation that is based on a privilege of abstract knowledge, representations and mental models of action, and moreover, based on a separation between practice and theory.

What the chapters have in common is an account of processes that involve a concept of action that is open but not very *interactive* (from a phenomenological ‘practice’ point of view); it is an account where the external world is always absent, or it is internalized and transformed in a way that there is no distinction between representation and reality: either through particular models of creativity and mind (chapter 4), or through particular notions of observation (chapter 3), or practical skills and networking (chapter 5) or through the priority of the ‘conceptual’ and ‘fictional’ over the empirical (chapters 1 and 2).

However, the process is not very *interactive* only if seen from the point of view of a belief that a division between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is true. It is precisely this non-separation between inside/outside that is important to the design process: this is where, from their point of view, the generative potential lies – the generative potential is located in what *can be* rather than *what is*. What the ethnography disturbs is precisely the belief in a separation between an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (representation and reality) that lies on the very basis of theories of practice within anthropology and STS/ANT accounts of innovation. ANT’s strong point is that innovation is about making reality, not representation – that is why it presents itself as an ‘ontological’ perspective. However, the ‘ethos of potential’ associated with the enchantment of innovation is not based in a notion of phenomenological *practice*, but rather in the generative potential of the ‘inside’ imagination. It is not the *relationship* between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that matters to designers, but rather an internalized process of creativity. Thus, the explorative, adventurous model of action (as it is enacted, for example, by Osvaldo) exists but remains within the ‘inside’ of the medium: for them, this ‘inside’ – that does not even count as an ‘inside’ because there is no such distinction between inside/outside for them – is all that there is.

Thus, my argument is that theories of ‘practical’, embodied skills, embodied

knowledge are themselves ‘situated actions’ (Suchman 1987), in a way that situated actions are not necessarily an *alternative* approach to knowledge and action, one that puts the practical in contrast with the rational, but rather the *use* of notions of ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ – and the relationships between them – is itself material of ethnographic description. Those very uses need to be seen as a form of practice. This is the idea that the uses of action, learning, knowledge and creativity can be themselves the focus of analysis. Thus, instead of choosing beforehand one point of view regarding practice as the practical/embodied as opposed to the rational/modern one – one needs to take the attitude of methodological philistinism (Gell 1992) and look at the practices/relationships that are established around those same dualistic notions. This means putting the question of relationships at the forefront: the idea is not that of describing the social relationships around objects, concepts or ideas rather than of objects themselves; this is not about what objects nor concepts or ideas mediate. Neither do I just simply analyze concepts as if objects - that is, as mediators. Rather, throughout the ethnography I make relationships. Ethnography is about making relationships rather than just describing them – this is the performative power of the ‘ethnographic’ sense of the ‘new’ – or to put it differently, describing is a way of *making*; description is creation – and ethnography in this sense equals design in those respects.

Thus, my analysis is a relational account of action/practice and innovation. It is about the way actors *use* conceptions of action and practice (the relationships they make between practical learning and theory), materiality and conceptuality (the relationships they make between objects and ideas; the relationships they make between concepts and fiction/imagination), creativity (the relationships they make between inside and outside), flexibility (the relationships designers make between their professional lives and careers and improvised open-ended models of action and personhood).

This kind of analysis is a contribution to current debates about innovation. For example, in ANT, the ‘dislocality of action’ (and therefore practice), is clearly set at the center of its theorization (see Oppenheim 2007: 477) that is, from the point of view of ANT, action is not seen as a property of humans, but it is rather seen as shared/distributed between people and things (humans and non-humans). However, my contention is that this ‘dislocality of action’ does not equip us to understand innovation processes: ‘action’ needs to be seen from a relational, dynamic point of

view, rather than a ‘phenomenological practice’ fixed one. One needs to relativize our own notion of what relationality means. Alfred Gell (1998) is actually a highly inspiring reference for looking at innovation practices, for his is a theory of relationality: he looks at the relational dynamics between subjects and objects. In contrast to Latour, for whom action is strongly determined by a realist conception of relationality, Gell’s point is not just that ‘objects’ have agency, but that objects can turn into subjects and subjects into objects in an art relationship. This is a relational view of action because in his ‘theory of art’ there is no fixed point on where to look at agency as agency shifts all the time – and therefore we need to shift our focus with it. It is this reversibility that matters from the ethnographic point of view, where the attention should be placed on how people make these kinds of recombinations and separations (Leach 2011). In other words: for Gell, relationships are not something ‘out there’. The strength of his proposal is not just in the idea of describing social *mediations* that surround objects of art, but the fact that there is no ‘phenomenological interaction’ point of view in his theory of relationality. The flexibility of this point of view is something that STS/ANT authors working about innovation – apart perhaps from Knorr Cetina (2001) or Strathern (Leach 2011; Knox *et al* 2006) – have not fully explored.

Similarly, my point is that there is also no fundamental standpoint to look at ‘reality’ or ‘ontology’ against ‘representations’; nor embodied practices and phenomenological interactions against concepts/mind as if these kind of relational oppositions were ‘things out there’ – what matters is to look at what relationships do people make with these entities (or which recombinations – Leach 2001) in order to relativize our own notions (be they cultural or disciplinary) of relationality. For example, generally practice approaches are based on the idea of blurring the modern division between theory and practice; they are also based in a phenomenological notion of interaction (Schatzki *et al* 2001). This phenomenological notion of interaction works as a truth claim within these theories – they tend to see phenomenological interaction as something outside, making it an object of description. A more dynamical and relational point of view of practice (as the one that for example Knorr Cetina 2001 claims) would be to look at what kind of relationships between theory and practice matter to the subjects we study.

The performativity of innovation is thus concerned with this aspect of relationality – it does not simply mean that innovation is embodied, nor that design

is a performative rather than an abstract activity, or that agency is distributed between people and objects: it means looking at the kinds of relationality people make (between fiction and reality, practice and theory, subjects and objects, and so forth). That is why I contend that there is much more to innovation processes than (in Latour's version) 'technologies gaining reality'.

## **Beyond the 'new' as an ethnographic outside – exploring engagements between design and ethnography**

One aspect that I have been exploring ethnographically throughout this thesis (particularly with more emphasis in chapter 4) is the centrality of individual authorized creativity within a design-centred paradigm, where innovation potential is seen to lie in the agency of an "author" (be it individual or collective). According to this view, "the new" does not come from the *outside* social world of users: designers' idea is that innovation comes from an internal process of creativity that works as intellectual encompassment (Leach 2007; 2004; 2011).

As I have mentioned in chapter 1, the collaboration between design and ethnography exposes an interesting dilemma – that some consider the ethnographer's dilemma – between conservatism and innovation. Referring to a debate between Lucy Suchman (ethnographer) and Terry Winograd (computer scientist), Grudin & Grinter (1995) are designers that stress "the ethnographer's deep professional bias against intervention", or what Button & Dourish (1996) call "the paradox of ethnomethodology". Their argument is that revolutionary designs with a large impact are not likely to be the results of methods such as ethnography and participatory design (see also Bogdan 2003: 14-15). This argument presupposes a view of innovation that is specific to a design community of practice: the view that the 'new' comes from the inside, rather than the 'outside'.

The idea that innovation cannot come from the world outside designers' creativity lies on the basis of a narrow and instrumental use of ethnography within design that does not explore its full creative potentialities. Dourish & Bell (2011: 64) criticize the deployment of ethnography by design in ubiquitous computing, with the view of ethnography as purely methodological and instrumental. "For the most part,

ethnography has come to be regarded as a toolbox of methods, divorced from a larger set of theoretical and methodological concerns that give it form and rigor. Ethnography is too often seen as an approach to field investigation that simply generates requirements for systems development by providing a clear sense of ‘what users want’”. In doing so, it underestimates ethnography and fails to realize its potential. What they point out to is thus the disciplinary power relations by which ethnography is placed in a service relationship.

The question, however, is which kind of contribution of anthropology to design do we mean. There are two kinds of proposals here: on the one side, there is the proposal for a critical anthropology *of* design (Suchman 2011; Wasson 2002) – this is the perspective of anthropologists who study designers; another kind of proposal is for a more critical design (Michael 2012a; Crabtree & Rodden 2002) – the perspective of those who work *with* designers, which is a challenge for corporate and organizational ethnographers, where ethnographers are expected to be productive for those sites (Cefkin 2009: 21).

In the latter proposal, anthropologists emphasize that the challenges for the collaboration of anthropology and design is actually concerned with how to participate in innovation processes in ways that go beyond user research, collaborative or participatory design (Wilkie 2010). Some argue that ethnography needs to be recognized as a creative process, more than just a way of collecting data (Wasson 2002), although its potential is rarely explored (Crabtree & Rodden 2002); and that ethnographers need to go beyond the role of just ‘informing’ design. Crabtree & Rodden (2002) in particular, suggest a broader conception of design work that “opens up a new play of possibilities for ethnography’s involvement in systems development”. In their view, “(t)he traditional configuration of ethnography in design is based on a certain version of design work, which might be described as ‘product oriented’”, however, they defend, “(a) more interesting deployment of ethnography occurs in situations where the approach is configured to assume *an exploratory role in innovative technical research*” (my italics).

A third kind of proposal is of those pointing to the possibilities for rethinking ethnography *as* design (Rabinow & Marcus 2008). For Rabinow, anthropology, as it is currently practiced, “is problematic insofar as it refuses, implicitly or explicitly, to abandon the analytical models that dominated social and cultural thought in the

past”. Thus, he defends, anthropology “cannot enter new terrain while it holds on to concepts and methods no longer suited for contemporary problems”. In conversation, Rabinow and Marcus gradually come to consider the virtues and possibilities of the design studio (Rees 2008: 10). Marcus, with his experience as a participant in architectural design studios, thinks about “the pedagogy of apprentice fieldwork/ethnography in terms of a studio or design practice – a process more characteristic of the arts than the social sciences” (Rabinow & Marcus 2008: 83).

“This idea of a design process de-centers the significance and weight of the fieldwork process conventionally viewed and makes it more organic and balanced with what occurs before, since (...) so much of the activity of fieldwork depends on being able to construct the site or sites beforehand in a deeply informed, even ethnographic, way. This fashioning of the site in advance is something that seeing research as a design process encourages us to think about” (ibid).

Marcus sees in the design studio “a way to develop alternative ideas about method in a more comprehensive way than traditional attitudes have permitted (ibid: 84)<sup>97</sup>; The virtue of the design studio, he argues, is that it is practice oriented: it is not theory driven (ibid.)<sup>98</sup>. The term design, thus, “expresses the primacy of inquiry and data over theory” (116); a way of “presenting thinking in motion” (ibid: 115).

Back to the first kind of proposal, regarding the question of what ‘engagements’ between design and anthropology we should aim for, Lucy Suchman (2011), after many years working at Xerox Park (Palo Alto, California, Silicon Valley)<sup>99</sup> reflects on the insights the ‘anthropological relocations’ might offer regarding what she considers the limits of design. These limits refer to “a conception of design method that has, until recently, gone largely uncontested and that systematically obscures the questions that anthropology might find central to a consideration of what constitutes change and how it happens” (ibid: 3). She refers to the uncritical position of design regarding topics such as future, change and

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<sup>97</sup> More concretely, “a place in which students could be taught – could experience – how to anthropologize all the information that they have assembled on their particular topic before they actually begin fieldwork” (ibid: 113).

<sup>98</sup> In fact, one of the critiques Rabinow addresses to the mainstream of science studies is concerned with this idea: “The sociological model and the literary-critical model essentially are interested in what they think of as theory, and then there are cases; theory is applied to a case. And this is, if you look at the modes of production, the reason Latour organizes things as he does (...). This mode of production is only possible if the theory is what drives it. And, so one of the things that I’m adamant about is that I am anti-theory and pro-concept and pro-experimentation.” (ibid: 80).

<sup>99</sup> Lucy Suchman was the first anthropologist hired by Xerox Park, and indeed, one of the first anthropologists working in a technological corporation.

innovation, that are often taken for granted in statements such as “The future arrives sooner here” (the self-promotion of Silicon Valley in the 1990’s), a statement that according to her, enacts a colonizing move, a way of reproducing the neo-colonial geographies of centre and periphery (post-colonial forms of future making). So her argument is that, “like anthropology, design needs to acknowledge the specificities of its place, to locate itself as one (albeit multiple) figure and practice of change” (ibid). Relocating design, thus, means bringing into view the politics of design, the situations that frame design. “One contribution to the project of relocating future-making”, then, she argues, “is an anthropology of those places presently enacted as centres of innovation that *illuminate* the provincial contingencies and uncertainties of their own futures, as well as the situated practices required to sustain their reproduction as central” (ibid: 2; my italics). So she rejects the recent proposal of design as a model for anthropology’s future (Rabinow et al. 2008):

“I argue instead that design and innovation are best positioned as problematic objects for an anthropology of the contemporary. I share an interest in ways of theorizing change, breaks, ruptures and the new that do not rely on singular origins, definite moments or invention, or trajectories of progressive development. (...) I believe that we need less a reinvented anthropology *as* (or for) design than a critical anthropology *of* design. The latter requires, among other things, ethnographic projects that articulate the cultural imaginaries and micropolitics that delineate design’s promises and practices” (ibid: 3; author’s italics).

Suchman is interested in “interrogating the category of the new”. Inspired by post-colonial scholarship that makes clear that “far from a universal good, the valorization of newness is a local preoccupation” (ibid: 15). She asks “what insights we might gain by shifting questions of innovation, creativity, and the new from their status as unexamined qualities, to constitutive moments in the reproduction of familiar modes of identification and action within particular locales and imaginaries” (ibid: 14).

As a proposal for a critical anthropology of design that aims for contributing to a more critical design practice, this is also the perspective where innovation is an ethnographic *outside*: it is a perspective that entails a subject-object differentiation where the ‘new’ here is the ‘object’ of study (cf. Knorr Cetina 2001). Suchman’s is a conservative position towards disciplinary boundaries, she remains conservative to what anthropology has always been: an account of something, doing ethnography for a meta-level of analysis, a perspective that relies on relatively fixed positions between subjects and objects of study. Ironically reproducing the colonial gaze that

she criticizes, she conceives the design-anthropology engagement as a collaboration where designers remain designers and ethnographers remain ethnographers; she gives examples of these collaborations that she experienced as collaborations that involved imagining possible organizational futures and that, as she describes, were “less a discrete deliverable in the form of a tool for planning than a series of engagements with an ongoing, more fragmented, and contested conversation” (ibid: 10); collaborations that are based in “anthropological reframings of received conceptualizations of the design problem” (ibid: 16). However, in this relationship, designers design while ethnographers observe, analyse and have a critical role – this is a traditional subject–object differentiation, where the *relational resources* are not explored.

This is not to deny that Suchman offers an incredibly valuable contribution to the debates about the engagement between design and anthropology, as it is perhaps true that design, unlike anthropology, has been largely unreflexive. However, from my point of view, the engagements between anthropology and design can be much more than an anthropological critique of design, which is, basically, anthropology *of* design. What I am interested in approaches that conceive this ‘engagement’ as a form of anthropology *with* (not for) design, that is, as a relational engagement rather than based on a subject-object differentiation. Anthropology needs to be critical of itself and its modes of knowledge production, therefore, anthropology may have a lot to learn from working with design – in this sense, I agree with Rabinow & Marcus that it is anthropology that needs to be deparochialized. It is in the encounters between anthropology and design that both can recognize its limits.

In the ethnography that I present, what my encounter with a different way of conceiving creativity reveals is that both disciplines risk essentializing the question of ‘where does the new come from?’: although both are concerned with relationships, ethnography considers generative what comes from the outside (which is obviously also processed inside, through interpretation), whereas design considers generative what is processed inside (through authorial creativity – although obviously that also entails forms of relationship with an ‘outside world’, despite that this relationality is not seen as active). Designers and ethnographers/anthropologists conceive relationships in different ways: the latter give primacy to the outside (‘reality’), whereas the former tend to give primacy to the inside (creativity). One

form of relationship – movement between inside and outside – is no more valid and superior than the other.

Thus, the encounter between design and ethnography should not be one where one *illuminates* the other, as Suchman defends, because it is the encounter itself between both that reveals their limits and have the potential to helps us – both ways – to reframe our questions. This encounter between design and ethnography can provide an opportunity for ethnography to revise its own ‘cultural’ assumptions regarding anthropological practice, *in addition to* a critical anthropology of design. The relationships between ethnography and design can be potentially more transformative (and post-colonial) than what Suchman proposes: for example, anthropology of design needs to be embodied in order to explore productively its ethnographic potential – an aspect that I explored in chapter 2. Anthropology of design should not just be a rational, critical exercise as in the deployments of science and technology studies; rather, this relationship has performative potential – so it is not just about revealing the performativity of design, but acknowledging that the performativity actually emerges from the ethnographic relationship. This idea takes us back to an idea of ‘engagement’ as explored by Mike Michael (2012a; 2012b) and his notion of idiot objects, where ‘the new’ is not an outside to be analysed, nor just an ‘inside’ in the intellectualized sense that I have been describing, it is something different.

Michael bases himself on Stenger’s figure of the “idiot” (a concept I already explored in chapter 2) and how practicing a proactive idiocy makes us interrogate “what we are busy doing” as social researchers (2012b). He refers, for example, to the importance of ‘disastrous engagement events’ within research (misbehaviors, unpredictable reactions, unpredictable participations), stressing how these ‘events’ are creatively generative. This is the disruptive/creative character of the idiot. The idiot is the new in potential; the idiot is what does not make sense. This notion is associated to the Deleuzian concept of event: the event is something that emerges out of the coming together of different entities, a mutually transformative effect that generates what Michael calls “inventive problem making” – the opening up of a space for a reframing of the issues. He thus examines the practices of speculative design (a specific type of design research) “as a chronic invitation to, indeed as a mechanism for, the proliferation of idiots” – these are practices that enable unforeseen participant actions, that is, misbehaviors (2012b: 537).

Speculative design objects are not solution-oriented – if they were, they would not have designed into them the sort of idiocy that he refers to. They are rather artifacts that embody openness, ambiguity and playfulness and propose a kind of ‘ludic action research’ – which can take the form of probes. Prototypes within speculative design suggest a relationship to the material that is very different to that typically found in social science – the material from these prototypes is mobilized in intuitive, open, uncertain ways in relation to the emerging design of the prototypes (2012a: 174). With this idea he underlines a form of engagement enacted by design which is, arguably, radically open when compared to social sciences – especially STS.

“The value for a social scientist is that these speculative design techniques neither aspire to yield more or less accurate representations of the social world nor aim to establish particular relations between various variables however ‘soft’ they may be. Rather, they concern ‘matters of process’ – they are not about problems of facts, but about the process of emergence of new relations which, potentially at least, can reconfigure what the very ‘fact’ or ‘problem’ might be (Michael 2012a: 175).

This concept suggests the embodied character of research, an aspect that is absent from STS: “One is tempted to say that this ‘idiotic sensibility *cum* sensitivity to the idiot’ that is bound up with the emerging design object reflects what we might call ‘corporeal’ or ‘sensory’ or ‘affective’ scholarship” (ibid). What Michael suggests with the figure of the idiot is thus a different form of ‘engagement’ than the one proposed by Suchman and something that is closer to Marcus and Rabinow’s proposal (2008: 113): “(...) the kind of research in which we seem to be interested is no longer simply the ethnography of X and their way of life. The field of research that we have been discussing (...) emerges in a much different way. We have to do things differently in the professional culture of method”.

What Rabinow & Marcus as well as Michael point to is an openness to explore the transformative effect of design, transposing it to the research practices and knowledge production in social sciences. What this thesis hopefully contributes to is the challenge of the ethnographic ‘*engagement*’ of ethnography with design – a challenge to include the embodiedness or ‘idiocy’ aspects of the ethnographic events and the becoming-with of both disciplines.

“The effort is to reflect explicitly (...) on encounters and engagements with counterpart others who are, almost like the anthropologist/ethnographer,

concerned with problems of the emergent, of knowledge production, of institution-building, of strategic decision making, etc.” (Rees 2008: 119).

For anthropology (and STS) there is always an ‘outside’ to analyse (for Suchman, the outside is the category of the new). However, the idiot figure makes us think that it is not the outside nor the inside that matters, but rather something different: the becoming-with of the ethnographic event. The point here is that this notion of idiocy is not exclusive to design engagements: the point is that ethnography, too – because of its complex, relational and emergent character – is idiotic by definition.

What I have presented in this ethnography are situations concerned with “engagement events” and the “disruptive character of the idiot” – situations where, in a learning process about what counts as creativity, the relationships generated and the forms of engagement ended up being disruptively creative, where the ‘new’ is not just an outside to be analysed but it is rather something ‘idiot’, that is, relational, something that generates the capacity for the new. In ethnographic terms, it was these idiotic situations – in the words of Michael, those “moments of evident idiocy and spontaneous becoming-with” (2012a: 171) – that is, all the misunderstandings, the idiotic conflicts, the frustrating moments – that invited me to reframe my issues: in this case, not only did I change in the process – progressively learning to understand what being creative in design terms requires – but the effects of the interaction also forced me to raise issues about the problematic status of creativity in ethnography/anthropology. That is why I tended to include my emotional self in the ethnographic description rather than to conceal it in a private domain, perhaps mirroring the process that I was learning – this was my way of ‘internalizing the outside’ for the ethnographic purpose.

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