

## Advanced design processes in some case studies from the contemporary art system: Delvoye, Fornasetti, Rist

### Processos de design avançado em alguns estudos de caso do sistema de arte contemporânea: Delvoye, Fornasetti, Rist

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#### Abstract

The study of the processes which characterize the work of some excellent and recognized masters of contemporary art testifies the existence of shared models and principles with craft and avant-garde design: refined organization, systematic filing, industrial productive continuity of components and collective participation in the development of the work of fine art. This paper describes the creative and productive processes of some case studies that belong to the world of art, in an attempt to identify their transferability to the world of design, particularly the ways in which Piero Fornasetti, Wim Delvoye, and other artists work, together with an overview of aesthetics as seen by Aby Warburg and his theory on art cataloging.

**Key words:** advanced design, organization of art work, components of the artistic product, artistic research.

#### Resumo

O estudo dos processos que caracterizam o trabalho de alguns reconhecidos e excelentes mestres da arte contemporânea atesta a existência de modelos compartilhados e princípios com o artesanato e o design de vanguarda: organização refinada, apresentação sistemática, continuidade de produção industrial de componentes e a participação coletiva no desenvolvimento de obras de arte. Este artigo descreve o processo criativo e produtivo de alguns estudos de caso que pertencem ao mundo da arte, na tentativa de identificar sua transferibilidade para o mundo do design. Em particular, os modos pelos quais Piero Fornasetti, Wim Delvoye, e o trabalho de outros artistas, juntamente com um panorama da estética visto por Aby Warburg e sua teoria sobre a catalogação de arte.

**Palavras-chave:** design avançado, organização de trabalhos de arte, componentes do produto artístico, pesquisa artística.

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#### Planning research in design and contemporary art

This research must be seen within the problematical scope of design processes and particularly the design processes which explore the methods and approaches of radical innovation (disruptive innovation) or advanced innovation, in the sense that it is projected into a non-immediate future in relation to the moment of action. Consequently, we are positioned within a portion of design studies known as advanced design (Celi, 2010)<sup>1</sup> which

focuses particularly on those issues that the international community of analysis of problems linked to design refers to as the “fuzzy front end of the innovation processes”

In relation to this area of interest, the researches I have carried out over the past year, with Alessandro Deserti, Elena Formia, Manuela Celi and other young colleagues who work with me at the INDACO Department of Milan Polytechnic, were focused on the relationship between the practices of research that characterize contemporary art and craft. The assumption we used, as our starting point, is that territories like the ones crossed by contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> This collection of essays comprises the state of the debate on the theme of advanced design within the homonymous research unit which I founded at the INDACO Department (Milan Polytechnic, Italy) in 2009.

art contain processes and working models in the search for conceptual innovation or for the artistic product, which can be defined as being "design-related".

We call design research the action performed by the designer during every stage of exploration aimed at solving problems linked to the need for a new product, commodity or good. We call it design research because it follows (in various models of interpretation, personalized to suit the designer's needs and personality) the traditional phases of the design process model<sup>2</sup>. We also use the term design research to define a type of exploration of the unknown or of fuzzy areas which characterize the actions of modern or contemporary artists who have organized highly articulated investigation processes requiring extensive programming. These activities are particularly well suited to the advanced design typical of industrial design processes, which is the point we start from and return to in relation to the present extra-disciplinary case study analysis.

### Clichés relating to the difference between art and design

In the recent article published in the international research magazine *Redige* (Celaschi *et al.*, 2010) we documented the research we are carrying out into "clichés relating to the relationship between creative genius in art and rationally organized research process in design".

Also within industrial professional spheres and economic analysis linked to the discipline of management, there is an old misunderstanding that considers the tradition of creative genius in art as a transgressive reality of behavioral traditions (disobeying rules and conventions). This form of disobedience is usually associated with the places of creation which have particular poetic characteristics (pleasant places for reflection), or which are untidy or informal, in the sense that they contain equipment and furnishings that belong to dynamics considered to be creative (typically in North American communication agencies, a work space is considered creative when it contains sports equipment and elements for relaxing and pursuing inter-personal relations).

In relation to time dynamics, banalities associate creative genius with certain clichés, such as for example, the fact of working inconstantly in time or at night, without pre-definable objectives, with long pauses for concentration and distraction and brief moments of un-programmable frenzied activity.

Moreover, according to "romantic" clichés, a creative genius tends to be exaggerated in terms of expressive language that characterize clothing, cars and instrumental items; it is *bohemian*, in the sense of "marginal and eccentric", like Baudelaire's "flâneur" (gentleman stroller of the city), idle and unsuited to the organized and defined times and methods of social life and orderly participation in the processes of production of value.

In this research, I wanted to encompass the fore of my observation of certain organized processes, which seem

to challenge another cliché of the creative genius of art: those processes that seem to belong to traditions that have nothing to do with the art system and which characterize industrial production contexts or which are organized in a managerial responsible way and are definable in advance.

### The outstanding elements of the case studies selected

I concentrated the analysis on certain case studies chosen for their diverse origins (all European however), linguistic approach to art, use of technologies, training and the nature of the output produced.

Piero Fornasetti (Milan, 1913-1988) was a painter, sculptor, interior decorator, printer of artistic books, designer and creator of over eleven thousand objects, sets and costumes, organizer of exhibitions and projects in Italy and international level.

Wim Delvoye (Belgium, 1965) is an eclectic contemporary artist, made famous by the "Cloaca" project: a series of machines that artificially elaborate food and drinks to obtain excrement through an articulate digestive system. He operates through an international holding between Belgium, Switzerland and China, involving collaborators in every kind of activity that can be used as a means of expressing contemporary art, from farming tattooed pigs in China, to a veritable factory of X-ray reproductions of parts of the body which are then used in his sets and architectural works.

Elisabeth Charlotte Rist, who works under the name of Pipilotti Rist (Switzerland, 1962) is a video artist who creates sets, video installations, films and projects of dynamic objects. She uses all the languages of video art, filtering them through two lines of personal research which feature in all of her production: the imaginary world seen from a female viewpoint, as a constantly overturning scenario of the vision of the world, and pop culture, via which to upend television stereotypes, creating an encounter between nature and surreal artifice.

### Cataloging and organization of information

Of Fornasetti's work it seems important, for the purposes of this research, to draw attention to the systematic strategy used to catalog reality filtered by his personal imagination. In an interview with me in 2008, his son Barnaba told me that his father used a significant number of containers (approximately 70) to collect the pictures, words, signs and drawings regarding the same number of keywords that he used to divide the imaginary world around him. "Stelle marine" (Starfish) and "Volti di donna ottocentesca" (Faces of 19th century women) were, for example, some of the keywords that were censured. In parallel, when starting to design a new product, he would write, on a card similar to those used to create commercial inventories, the geometric, material and decorative

<sup>2</sup> It follows the articulation into five phases typical of all the design processes: (i) observation of reality; (ii) construction of simplified models of reality; (iii) manipulation of simplified models; (iv) assessment of the pros and cons of pre-design; (v) transformation of the manipulated model into reality (Celaschi, 2008).

description of the object that he was designing, without drawing it, but specifying which of the keywords in his extensive file was to be used as reference for the linguistic imagination he was using. Consequently, engaging the skills of the professional artists who worked in his studio, he had them draw the product that was to become "his". This process exploited a system of encoding the imagination and description of the product which left the right level of authoring and, at the same time, a level of delegation to the formalization, enough to multiply the productive capacity of the studio, also in terms of quantity, without ever losing control of either the product or the recognition of the designer's hand and linguistic style.

Filing processes, including iconographic filing, as a cognitive basis of modern and contemporary art are practiced systematically in numerous countries and frequently refer to the culture of cataloging experimented and furthered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Aby Warburg School in London (now the Warburg Foundation).

### Creation of innovative components and products in progress

As well as finished products, Fornasetti and Delvoye produce processes for the fabrication of semi processed products and components which cannot be used independently. In the case of Fornasetti, his extensive file contains collections of monographic pictures and inventorial descriptive cards of objects. In the case of Delvoye, we can describe the various "mono-productive building" and the division of the work implicated in the construction of his "factory"<sup>3</sup>, in the form of a synthetic and playful "Wim City", in which every building houses a project or a line for the preparation of products in progress for use in the construction of independent works<sup>4</sup>. The clearest example is the production of pictures using the X-ray technique used in clinical radiology, which interpret unusual behaviors and situations in relation to those investigated by medicine. These pictures are used by the artist to decorate the windows of his gothic cathedrals, simulating the filtering of light through the "cultured, leaded windows" typical of monumental Gothic art.

### Sharing work and co-authoring of creation

The work associated in all the case studies chosen for this research is characterized by the theme of co-authoring, considered not as a need or possibility to collectively design the final work of art, but as a way of organizing the production processes of the work, capable of involving different specialists on a synchronized basis, without losing control of the author's reference language and poetics. We may call it "division of labor", which does not refer to an assembly chain as such, but to a structure in which selected players who are trained, sensitized and autonomous in their professional and authorial expression, create, together with the artist, a complex work or a considerable

number of works in a short space of time. In all three case studies, there is a relationship between complexity of action, experimentation of innovative expressive languages, quantity and wealth of action, which would have been impossible in the case of the independent Renaissance artist, who worked alone and was the sole, polyhedral player. The complexity of Pipilotti Rist's video art, her ability to produce a real film (Pepperminta) or to set up entire pavilions at the MoMA using video installations; the over eleven thousand products created by Fornasetti during his career, all recognizable and perfectly synchronized in the system of personal expressive codes; the countless number of activities, some of which extremely diverse, which characterize the work of Delvoye (from tattoos on animals to the construction of gothic cathedrals and publications, the artistic casting of bronze and steel and the creation of authentic design elements – in which to store the most unlikely objects –, to video-artistic films).

### Use of scenario techniques

Rist's work makes frequent use of scenario techniques and the construction of her works seems to belong to a continuous and unusual proliferation of independent outputs, but which can be reconfigured within a single world, a primordial and primitive set, which is that of the world filtered through the female imagination. An imagination which has two boundaries: on one hand, nature experimented with the body and senses and, on the other, the delegation of the television to produce every translation and provide a filter between reality and ourselves.

The use of the scenario technique can also be seen, albeit differently, in the work of the other two authors mentioned: each one of Fornasetti's files contains a scenario which focuses strongly on a single word. In Delvoye, the dominant metaphor is that of a contemporary Gothic world, in which the final effect is the same as the original effect of Gothic art, but the subjects or signs through which the result is obtained are absolutely innovative.

The use of the scenario technique in the everyday activity of advanced design is a practice which is applied frequently, especially with the aim of creating forward movement and describing it in order to allow the construction of an extensive imagination that can be shared, simultaneously, by several authors (designers) or several subjects (businessman, authors, marketing staff, distributors, promoters, and customers).

### Constant research and occasional applications

All three cases which I have used as reference, as well as an extremely vast community within the contemporary art system, seem to refer to a characteristic which belongs to artists considered to be anomalous, due to the continuity, quality, international recognition, innovation of language and experimentation used, with respect to the artistic research corridors dominant during their creative

<sup>3</sup> The factory is described metaphorically (but not excessively) on the artist's website Wim Delvoye (Delvoye, s.d.).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the international cooperation system with Chinese and Swiss tattoo artists (Wim Delvoye Tattoo Shop Zurich), the "X rays" building or the tattooed pig farm (Art Farm China).

moment and in the dominant culture: there is a need for continuous basic research which crosses the artist's production in the long term and which regards a thematic level and a view which are not always those that transpire from the works that occasionally identify the artist and for which they are known.

We could sustain a T-shape research model according to which each of these excellent cases mentioned organizes the artistic research activity, cultivating, in the long term and with continuity, one or more sequences of basic monographic investigations (the horizontal line of the T), arbitrarily or absolutely unrelated to the type of products or works created as artistic output: the vertical line of the T corresponds to the need to germinate or the opportunity of germinating products or works which take roads that are only apparently occasional and which can materialize solely thanks to this continuous basic research.

We could sustain that the search for an original functionalism derived after the creation of the product is, for example, one of the basic research sequences which cross the work of Ettore Sottsass (2010, 2007). Sottsass sustains that all his products have a function and considerable respect for the function, even if said that function can be found only after they have been designed and not necessarily beforehand.

## Conclusions

The ability to originally produce radically innovative objects and obtain products capable of disrupting the continuity of dominant trends (and therefore the typical objectives of advanced design), can also be developed thanks to the organization and sharing of work, the ability to carry out basic research which generates innovative components and products in progress, regardless of the applications which potential opportunities will make it possible to accomplish and the characteristics of which are completely unknown when the research takes place.

The accurate filing and cataloging, the creation of products in progress and components, the sharing of

work and management of creative processes that allow the joint participation of several authors in the creation, as well as the use of the scenario technique, are all activities that qualify the work of some of the most famous exponents of the modern and contemporary art system. In relation to this, it is interesting to understand how, parallel with the application of these instruments and procedures within art, it is profitable to recognize their potential and understand the methods with which to favor their use in the practices that characterize advanced design, even when this takes place in highly organized and structured contexts, like that which typically regards the production of consumer goods.

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