

# From Showing to Connecting. The Design of Exhibitions (*Object Notes #1*)

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## Abstract

*The paper aims to focus within the history of exhibitions some experiences that are fundamental in describing the relationship between graphic design and exhibition practice. Through a selection of cases that have highlighted the qualities, disparities, and characterizing attributes of the exhibition system through design, the paper aims to read the project as a scenario of a production activity. The reading of some internal exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s now become an opportunity to reflect on the relational system intrinsic to display practices. Starting from the reading and analysis of the editorial objects produced on the occasion of the exhibitions, the contribution attempts to show a relationship between the curator's work, the graphic project carried out, the professional figures involved and the result obtained.*

*The cases identified find in Germano Celant's curatorial practice a focus on the graphic qualities of the exhibition activities he imagined. This practice makes it possible to emphasize within the paper the theme of exhibition design as an instrument of connection. And, at the same time it emphasizes the disciplines involved in collective exhibitions to narrate the device-exhibition and the production qualities of the imagined systems.*

*Keywords: exhibitions, curating, display, graphic design, project*

## I.

"Vignelli Associates' basic design belief is that 'design is one'. We believe in discipline as the pursuit of structural integrity, appropriateness as the search for the specific, and ambiguity as a plurality meaning" [Vignelli Associates 1990, p. 1].

This definition of how the studio founded by Lella and Massimo Vignelli in 1971 works opens the book *design: Vignelli* (1990). The design of the Vignelli Associates studio is not only embodied in specific design applications but it universally encompasses work done on the scale of corporate identity, packaging, transportation graphics, architectural graphics, book, magazine and newspaper design, poster design, interior design, furniture design and product design [1]. The text by curator

and critic Germano Celant included in this volume celebrates these skills, emphasising a unique coherence and linearity in the production of his work. He speaks of this through a plural *Vignellis* that identifies a quality of shared thought capable of designing a process that renounces subjectivity to yield to the 'system' characterised by forms, volumes, colors and materials.

When this text came out in the volume –with its square format, the red colour identifying Vignelli's corporate identity programme, and with the title printed in white in Our Bodoni [2] on the cover and spine– dedicated to the designer's design, profound interactions between the curator and the graphic design studio profile had already been ensured. Indeed, in 1985

when Celant curated *The European Iceberg. Creativity in Germany and Italy Today* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto from 8 February to 7 April, Massimo Vignelli was present in two ways. The graphic treatment of the exhibition and the volume is defined by a return of six typographic choices and five colors. The catalogue, published by the Italian publishing house Nuove Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta in Milan, presents a series of vertical bands that, unrolling and repeating themselves throughout the spread cover, draw the two flags: green, white and red for Italy, black, red and yellow for Germany. Here, Vignelli's rules defined by the recommended use of six fonts such as Garamond, Bodoni, Century Expanded, Futura, Times Roman and Helvetica [3] seem to shatter against the identity of the state on display. The typographic choices do not fully celebrate the states except in a few cases. The six repetitions of the title are composed in Futura, Century and Fette Fraktur within the bands of the German flag, in Helvetica, Bauer Bodoni and Egyptienne for the Italian flag (fig. 1) [4].

The drawing of identity is not Vignelli's only contribution to *The European Iceberg*, in fact in addition to the sections *Architecture*, *Art*, *Cinema & Film*, *Design*, *Fashion & Mode*, *Photography* and *Theater* there was also *Graphic Design* in the exhibition. Giovanni Anceschi's text-manifesto *Graphic Axes*, placed at the opening of the author's section, unfolds in seven points the trajectory of the graphic trends included in the geographical bisector between Italy and Germany (emphasising the passage from Switzerland) [Anceschi, 1985, p. 262]. Anceschi's essay defines the connotations of the father of the creative explosion of Italian graphic art to Antonio Boggeri, Similarly, he declares numerous figures who intertwined graphic, pictorial, typographic and drawing qualities within their work. For Italy he reports Aldo Manuzio, Alberto Griffò, Pier Luigi Cerri, Luigi Veronesi, A.G. Fronzoni, Albe Steiner, Franco Grignani, Italo Lupi, the naturalised Bob Noorda, Bruno Munari and Enzo Mari. On the German side, only a few names are mentioned, the two exhibited designers Michael Klar, Karl Heinz Krug together with Peter Behrens. Significantly present are the names of artists and designer from outside these two countries such as the Austrian Herbert Bayer and the Swiss Josef Müller-Brockmann, Max Huber and Xanti Schawinsky. Along with the text, thumbnail images of the projects

displayed by Lupi, Vignelli, Cerri and Fronzoni exhibit a production quality typical of graphic design in connection with art, design, architecture, information, and exhibition's practice. The text in the catalog also celebrates the qualities of the exhibition design produced by Vignelli, in fact he writes (or explains): "One of the most brilliant participants here was Massimo Vignelli, who worked out a modular system of lights – and it caused a sensation. Vignelli, together with another 'Nordic', this time the Dutchman Bob Noorda, founded Unimark, the great international studio, which took on many graduates of Ulm, for instance an industrial designer like Frank Hess" [Anceschi 1985, p. 264].

The layout is designed by wooden panels arranged within the space that not only section off the various rooms but also present part of the paper materials produced: if on the vertical surface of the panel we find the posters selected for display, catalogs and publications find space on small shelves inserted perpendicular to the panels. Along with these we also find platforms and parallelepipeds to define the exhibition language conceived by Vignelli. Cerri exhibited in the section dedicated to graphics the identity designed for the XXXVII Biennale di Venezia in 1976, Fronzoni the poster for Fontana at the Galleria La Polena in 1966, Vignelli a series of publications designed from 1963 to 1980 while Lupi some posters among which it is possible to recognise the 'T' designed in collaboration with Alberto Marangoni for the XVI Triennale di Milano. Regarding the differences between exhibition and publication, it is important to underline that in the catalogue each discipline presented is present in text and photographic format, while in the exhibition we do not find the materials of the *Fashion & Mode*, *Theater* and *Cinema & Film* sections [5].

On display in the exhibition we find Pier Luigi Cerri's work for *Identité italienne. L'art en Italie depuis 1959*, the exhibition curated by Celant at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris from 25 June to 7 September 1981. The long timeline designed for the exhibition – which controls the catalogue by means of the recurring, placed above each page and underlined by a black thread– generates an editorial volume that, with its 648 pages, does not explicitly present files dedicated to the 18 selected artists but a long chronology of political, historical, cultural and artistic events in Italy from 1959 to 1980. The identity devised by Cerri is



Fig. 1. Front cover of the catalogue. [Celant 1985].



Fig. 2. Front cover of the catalogue. [Celant 1981].

defined by a photograph of the celestial map where we find the insertion of a grid subdivides space and the stars together with stylization of a cube, the upside-down Italian peninsula, marble faces and other Italic characters (fig. 2) [Celant 1981]. The layout, also designed by Cerri with Vittorio Gregotti, had envisaged a concentricity deriving from a honeycomb pattern that made each space monographic, giving it to a single artist. In the concretization of the editorial volume, however, these islands are split by the will to respect a constraint defined by time, thus drawing a sequence of pages deriving from a long continuation of Italian history [Messina 2015].

This case helps us to understand how studying the design of the exhibitions within these years not only exposes knowledge about the exhibition space, but also describes a professional and design figure interested in the design of a relationship between image, text, space and audience. The elements intended to keep track of the work thus become an extension of a physical and experiential manifestation that transposes into the visual identity the task of surviving, through the scenarios produced, over time. At the same time, the relationships between curator, architect, and designer—the latter to be understood as graphic designer and professional figure responsible for the exhibition and publishing format—produce countless points of contact that validate an awareness in the design of the project on different scales. Starting with Celant and his interactions with the other professional figures presents a vast territory of conscious actions that allow their own quality of action to emerge within a history of exhibitions.

## II.

*The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968* is the title of the exhibition organised by Germano Celant at the Contemporary Art Museum in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York from 8 October 1994 to 22 January 1995. Here the name of Massimo Vignelli as graphic designer returns again, declared in the third line on the flap of the hardback catalogue's dust jacket after the name of the organiser and Umberto Eco for the preface. In this work Celant figures as organiser and curator of the Art section together with Andrea

Branzi for Design, Gian Piero Brunetta for Cinema, Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco for The Literature of Art, Vittorio Gregotti for Architecture, Luigi Settembrini for Fashion, Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi for Artists' Crafts and Italo Zanner for Photography [Celant 1994]. The exhibition design consecrates the name of Gae Aulenti together with architect Vittoria Massa and costume designer Giovanna Buzzi. The architecture and art magazine *Anfione e Zeto* dedicated issue 11 to Aulenti's exhibition design for the three spaces where the exhibition was directed: New York, in Paris at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou and in Milan at the Galleria della Triennale. Aulenti's contribution through words, technical drawings and photographs of the exhibition spaces made it possible to include the rules and problems she faced in the magazine.

"The first requirement was to break the continuum of the spiral, which makes everything analogous. The only way to do this was to throw these rooms into space, towards the invisible center of the museum. But it was not easy: the slopes made it necessary to use plinths. Insurance prevented us from displaying some works in the void, as we wanted" [Aulenti 1995a, p. 17].

Aulenti's drawings published in the magazine still hold together the idea that the works could be hung in the void, in those acute angles she designed that divided part of the space into segments: from the heart of the museum one could see, from bottom to top, the angles converging in the centre of the room, extensions of the rooms that indicated their presence in the exhibition space. While the works were exhibited in the conformity defined by the museum space, Aulenti in the design of the exhibition space "recalling the responsibility of the geometry of the building with eccentric signs to the evidence of its form" [Aulenti 1995b, p. 16] devoted herself to defining the presence of the four rooms to the visitor. Thus trying to be more generous towards the rhythms and sequences that the content of the exhibition required.

Instead, Vignelli's visual identity for the exhibition was completely absorbed by the space. In fact, the photos documenting the exhibition only display small captions next to the works and the title of the exhibition, written in Futura, on the base of the spiral climb designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Instead, the editorial of the catalogue in relation to the exhibition space was

totally controlled by Vignelli's rules. The 760-page volume presents a sequence of pages dedicated to Italian creativity in the twenty-five years that, from the fall of the fascist regime to the movements of '68, defined a transformation in culture. The cover with its white background houses eleven overlapping, semi-transparent images representative of the arts on display. The inside of the volume, on the other hand, holds together the textual and photographic contents produced through a graphic design defined by four columns and wide margins (fig. 3). Each of the eight sections opens with a double black page, inhabited by a large white typography that turns out to be the beginning of the essay that will run through the following pages until it runs out. Vignelli in his design gives space to exploratory texts in which the curators of the sections together with other authors define possible answers as to why it is possible to talk about the Italian metamorphosis of those years.

Related to exhibition practices two names mentioned individually within this essay find form of collaboration within the XVI *Triennale di Milano*: while Italo Lupi is the creator of the Triennale's identity from 1979 to 1982 together with Alberto Marangoni, Gae Aulenti results in Giunta's responsibility until his resignation in March 1980 for the section *The arrangement of design*. The identity designed is represented by a three-dimensional T in which it is possible to see in its false axonometry the presence of five rooms, each of a different color and dedicated to the disciplines on show, which are the subtitle of this exhibition event: City, Architecture, Design, Fashion, Audiovisual. The graphic design is thus adapted to different formats such as posters, guidebooks and three-dimensional signage structures.

"Thus it was proposed –but already close to the first opening, the challenge of December 1979–, the construction of a 'Triennale Image Coordination Centre' that would in fact take on the role of art direction: an innovation in line with the hypothesis of change that attempted to replace the great Triennale exhibition with a continuum of events, and a monolithic Board with more and more coordinated presences. Thus, unlike previous editions where the graphic image of the current Triennale was determined by a single creative contribution, designed and applied with a certain rigidity, standardized therefore for all communication

materials –a choice that was undoubtedly justified by the monothematic nature of the events and their transitory nature in time– this 16th edition commissioned two graphic designers –Italo Lupi and Alberto Marangoni– to communicate visually, and with the utmost poignancy, the different way of being and operating of this administration" [Pansera 1982, pp. 20, 21].

It is important to remember how this design can find space within this reconstruction for the qualities imagined and designed together with the visual identity. Likewise, the designed communication finds, through different graphic solutions, valid forms and applications to always represent the five disciplines together [6].

### III.

Among the outcomes of the collaboration between the curatorial figure of Germano Celant and the design qualities of Pier Luigi Cerri is also found in the joint planning of the first Florence Biennale entitled *Il Tempo e la Moda* in 1996. The Biennale di Firenze project sees Celant, Luigi Settembrini and Ingrid Sischy as artistic directors together with a series of curators involved in following the seven sections in the first edition. So is Cerri for the graphic consultancy carried out, both for the Biennale and for its first event in *Il Tempo e la Moda*. We also find Gae Aulenti's name again as Vice-President of the Florence Biennale and, together with Vittoria Massa, as the person in charge of the Visitors installation, a section curated by Settembrini with Franca Sozzani.

Under Cerri's direction, the graphic design of the catalogue was entrusted to Marcello Francone, the only name to appear as graphic designer in the English volume *Art/Fashion* (1997) for the transmigration of the art and fashion section by Celant, Sischy and Tabatabai Asbaghi to the Guggenheim Museum SoHo in New York from 12 March to 8 June 1997. The volumes are headed by the full outline of a 'B', written in Futura and pierced by the white symbol of the Florentine Lily. Next to this 'B' there is the year '96 (Fig.4). The general catalog distributed in Italian holds together in its 684 pages texts, interviews, photographs and images related to the espote works and the relationships between art and fashion [Monti 2017, pp. 253-257]. While the introductory texts find the names of the three

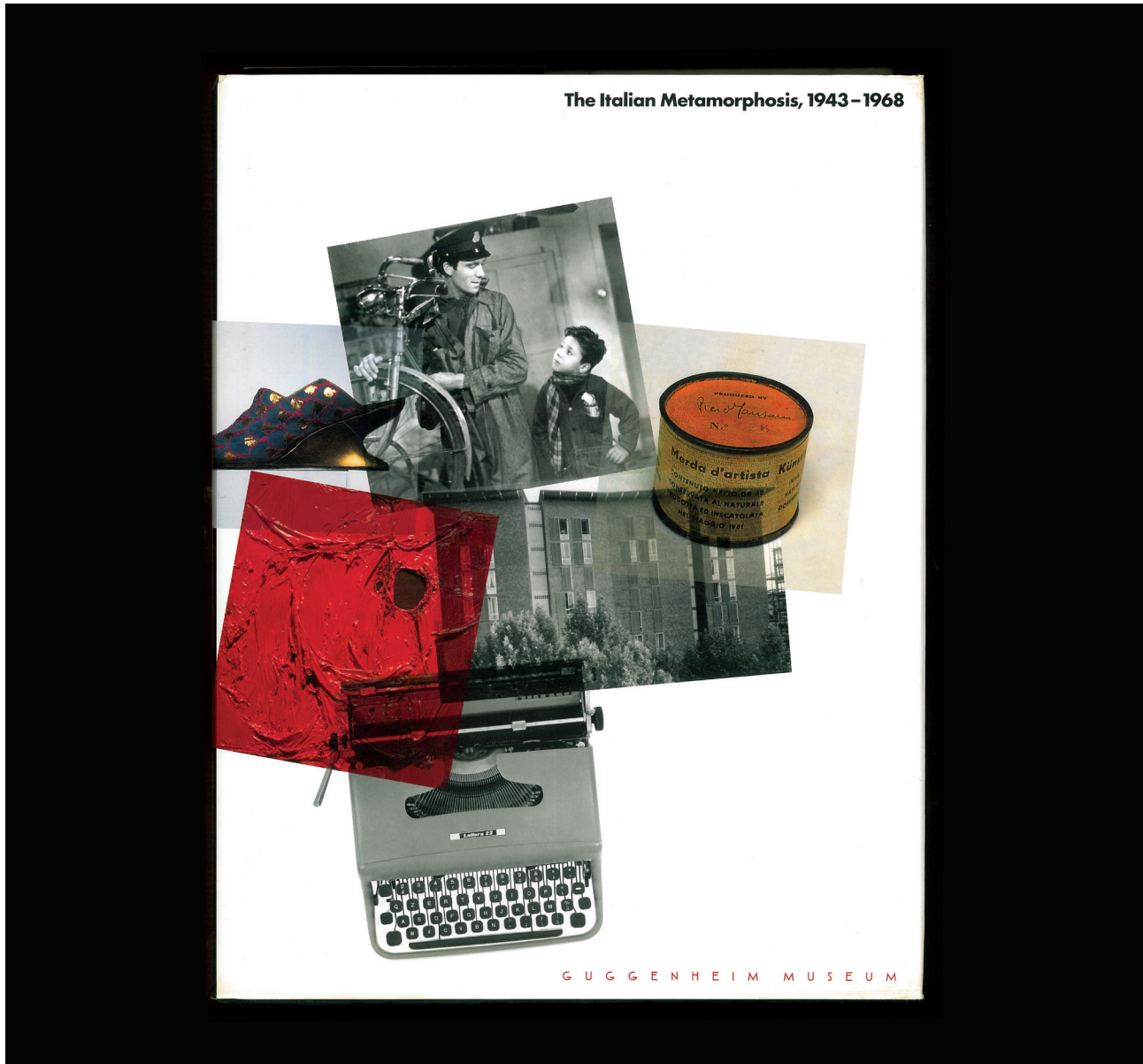


Fig. 3. Front cover of the catalogue. [Celant 1994].

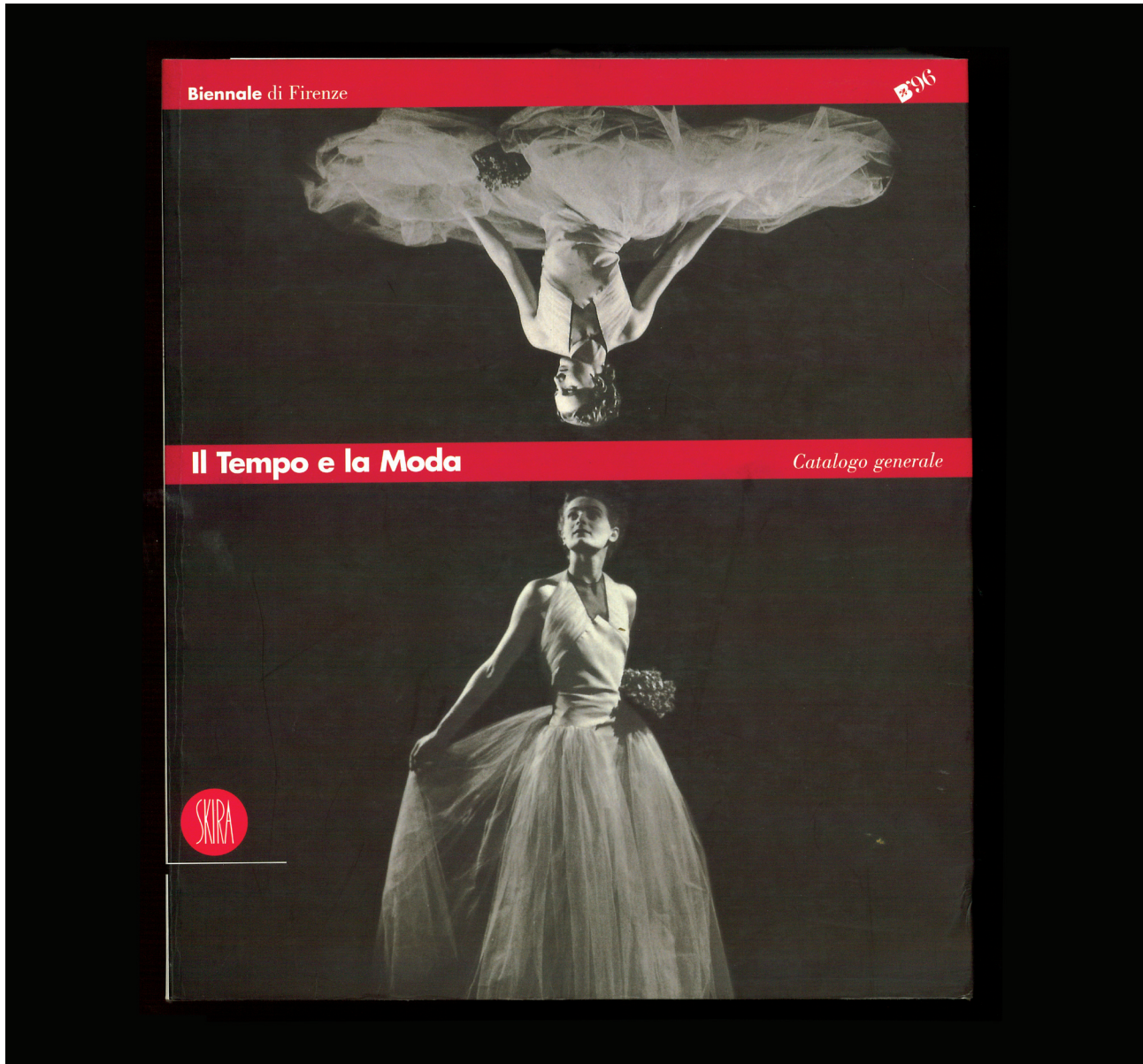


Fig. 2. Front cover of the catalogue. [Celant 1981].



converging curators as authors, the first essay signed by Celant is entitled *Il giardino della Moda e delle Arti: la Biennale di Firenze*. It is written through an incursion of questions posed by the different voices involved in the project, the first of which is Aulenti's own: "What is the reason for this Florence Biennale, dedicated to the subject of fashion, and what is the philosophy of this project?" [Celant 1996, p. 13]. Celant uses the modality of conversation and questioning as an action to try to describe the work he did; in fact, the text that runs for ten pages ends with the opening, double-page spread of the *Art/Fashion* section he co-curated.

The transcription of a conversation –and thus of the mode of mutual exchange– is not only used by Celant in the first pages, but we also find it between Sozzani and Aulenti as the opening text for the Visitors section. In fact, in the latter, the dates of the beginning (December 11, 1995) and closing (September 21, 1996) hint at the time in which the exchange occurred produced the forms of the exhibition project. The text is entitled Gae Aulenti - Franca Sozzani: how a project is born and seems to celebrate the quality of human relationships within the design. This emphasizes the outcome of a working method that implies the design of a collaboration between space, time, authors and roles, works and dimensions that seems to recall a series of experiences within the production of exhibition making [Aulenti, Sozzani 1996, pp. 389-393].

The work outlined in this essay is here, with *Il Tempo e la Moda*, condensed by a need for continuous dialogue between the different systems, especially in the definition of active collaboration between all the figures involved. The projects mentioned not only interrogate the modes of exhibition making, but explore the intrinsic relationships of experiences, many times only declared by names in colophons and official documents. In this, the analysis and documentation of the editorial formats of the exhibitions draws a rich panorama of information useful for tracing fundamental experiences in the intertwined culture of the disciplines. "As natural as the parallel and connection between the exhibition and the publication formats may appear, given the traditional involvement of graphic designers in the making of exhibition catalogues and books as well as their more recent direct engagement in writing, editing and publishing, the link between editorial and curatorial work to some extent raises the ques-

tion of the specificity of the exhibition as a medium and format of communication, and how it is used in this sense by graphic designers" [Camuffo, Dalla Mura 2014, p. 24].

Giorgio Camuffo and Maddalena Dalla Mura in *Graphic Design, Exhibiting, Curating* (2014) highlights the value produced by the outcome of the graphic designer as a medium of a communication that, in the book or exhibition format, generates a platform for mediation, production and circulation. In this, the proposed research has taken shape precisely through the study and analysis of the mediums produced, these voluminous, independent, complex publishing bodies that no longer fall under the technical connotation of the word catalogue. Instead of holding together only the information in the exhibition, they become publications in their own right, real study tools that oscillate between the wills of showing and explaining.

Tracing how exhibition design is an integral part of a research work defined by several professionals emphasizes how the cases shown in this mapping are only one part of a larger system. While *The European Iceberg. Creativity in Germany and Italy Today* (1985) makes explicit the figure of the graphic designer as an actor in an artistic scene, *Identité italienne. L'art en Italie depuis 1959* (1981) keeps track of a work declared in two different ways by the same design figure: in the physical space the exhibition inhabits the Centre Pompidou in nuclei of activity, while the catalogue exposes an inclusive temporal narrative that is extraneous to the monolithic artistic presence on display. The case of the *XVI Triennale di Milano* (1979-1982) makes it possible to present the first work activated by the institution towards the project of visual identity, while *Il Tempo e la Moda* (1996) seems to synthesise, within the experiences faced, an interest in the theme of the relationship as an act of production. Similarly, the sum of the actions realised generates a new surface: a place of encounter and confrontation where certain relationships are confirmed through the analysis of an experience. And it is precisely the term collaboration that identifies the outcome that, between professionalism and production, manages to converge within different formats the interest in defining a form of communication, identifying which forces and which applied languages have been able to generate the qualities inherent in exhibition-making practices [7].

## Notes

[1] The list of these applications of graphic design and of a methodology aimed at defining rules [Vignelli 2010], is stated in the index of the volume *design: Vignelli* (1990), which assigns each section a personal definition along with a selection of projects with as many captions aimed at explaining the work carried out.

[2] The Our Bodoni typeface family was commissioned by Bert Di Pamphilis, former president of the World Typeface Center (WTC) in New York and designed by Tom Carnase under the direction of Massimo Vignelli in 1989. The typeface became a sort of Vignelli trademark and is still widely used in corporate and editorial graphics.

[3] "In order to draw attention to that issue I made an exhibition showing work that we had done over many years by using only four typefaces: Garamond, Bodoni, Century Expanded, and Helvetica. The aim of the exhibition was to show that a large variety of printed matter could be done with an economy of type with great results. In other words, is not the type but what you do with it that counts. The accent was on structure rather than type. [...] Besides those already mentioned, I can add Optima, Futura, Univers (the most advanced design of the century since it comes in 59 variations of the same face), Caslon, Baskerville, and a few other modern cuts. As you can see my list is pretty basic but the great advantage is that it can assure better results. It is also true that in recent years the work of some talented

type designers has produced some remarkable results to offset the lack of purpose and quality of most of the other typefaces" [Vignelli 2010, p. 54].

[4] Vignelli's choice draws an operation that attempts to celebrate the qualities of the foundries and typographic design of Germany and Italy. At the same time for Germany we find the Century Expanded (America) together with the German Futura and Fette Fraktur. Instead with the Italian Bodoni in the Bauer Bodoni version are Helvetica in Condensed Bold (Switzerland) and Egyptienne in Condensed Bold (Holland).

[5] In fact, there is no reference to the works in these sections in the catalogue in the chapter *Catalogue of the Exhibition and List of Illustrations*, pp. 321-333.

[6] <<https://triennale.org/archivi-triennale/16>> (accessed 14 July 2022)

[7] This paper is the first action of a series entitled *Object Notes* with the aim of investigating and contextualising the work of the graphic designer within different disciplines. The narrative displayed in *From showing to connecting. The design of exhibitions* consists of numbered acts. This makes it possible to keep track of the possibility of the continuation of this intervention aimed at defining different modes of production within the practice of the designer.

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