

From Digital to Postdigital: the Dialogical Relationship between Drawing and Design

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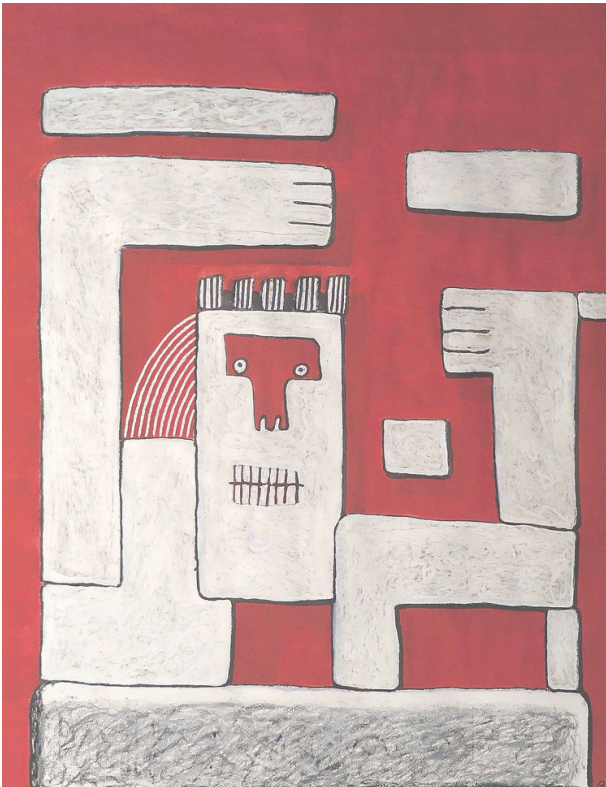
Drawing, a synthetic dialogical expression that does not require words, has been profoundly transformed by the digital transition, and the same happened for design. The semantic distinction between drawing and design (understood one as a fundamental tool of representation and communication of the project, and the other as an action of sense projected onto reality through artifacts) has established itself with the emergence of new technologies and tools. Culturally this distinction, as can also be seen from the writings of the Italian masters, indicates only different phases of the project, in which the act of drawing is 'concrete thought', the moment in which the possible appears.

For Ettore Sottsass drawing was also linked to a ritual about the pleasure of the relationship with the objects, particular papers, pencils, colors, which he kept in a closet:

"in that closet I keep countless pencils, even colored pencils and a box with pencils of ninety different colors [...]. Then there are temperas, boxes of watercolors, brushes, inks, erasers, sharpeners, fixatives and glues of various kinds. When I open the doors of that wardrobe, an inebriating, slightly chemical, vaguely exotic smell comes out. Perhaps the desire to make drawings comes out of that closet, together with those mysterious smells or, maybe, the drawings are born from the desire to leave marks on those white papers, with those pencils, with those soft colors. I don't think there are much, much more urgent features that lead to drawing" [Sottsass 1990, p. 402].

The masters of design had a magical, ritual and complex relationship with drawing, as a privileged tool for the appearance of what 'is' not yet, as a tool for expressing and clarifying thoughts: "if one is lucky, if one manages not to

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Fig. 1. Andrea Branzi, *Madri*, 2017.

make a mistake, if one lets oneself be guided by unknown divinities, if the moment is miraculous, then thoughts appear on paper; –as if they came out of a dark space, as if they came out of nowhere–, thoughts can be seen clearly, thoughts light up” [Sottsass 1997, p. 507].

The magical act of appearing of signs on paper is cultivated as a necessity with very ancient roots, as a dialogue between us and the universe, without the mediation of words: “our objects are in fact often thought and designed not as a simple response to objective needs, but as acts of self-identity, as the transference of a role that was once ours, and today no longer belongs to us, but which we will not give up. The objects that man loves are objects that have a soul; in the sense that they contain some sliver of mystery. This mystery is the result of an autonomy of objects with respect to man [...]. It is almost a form of animism, a complex identity that enriches the relationship of use” [Branzi 1986, p. 191].

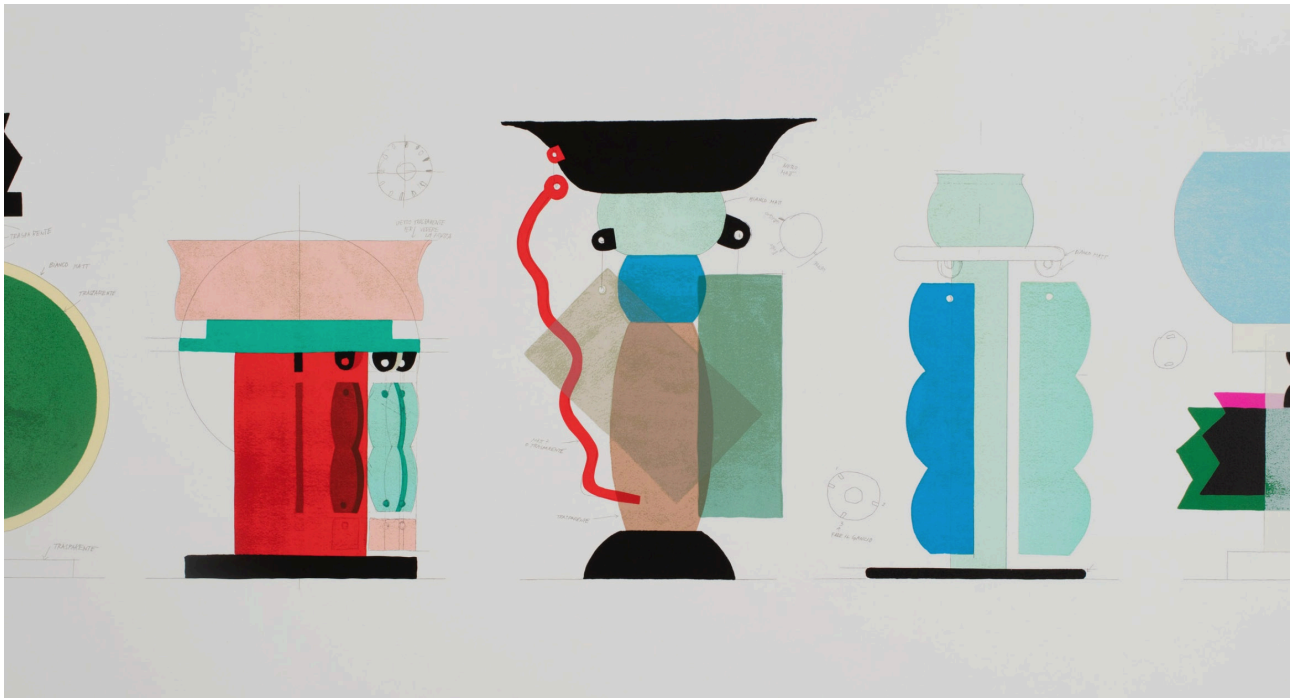
This magical aspect of drawing, where things take on substance and meaning, is actually the tool through which the imagination becomes concrete and deals with reality; it is the place where the possible forms: “the imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries” [Foucault 1998, p. 106].

The effects of the digital revolution

The digital condition, also defined as ‘contemporary plankton’ due to its set of fluctuating differences, determines a context, for design, in which it is not easy to identify the margins of possibility and collective meaning. We find ourselves acting in a state of continuous present, crushed by the speed of happening and the simultaneity of phenomena; design follows countless cultural, socio-technical and productive paths: that of knowledge, of hybridized knowledge, of social and cultural emergencies.

Today we can say that digital, even with not exactly positive phenomena, has been completed. Already at the end of the '90s Nicholas Negroponte was announcing the end of the digital revolution when we would have noticed the digital for its absence and not for its presence; but at that moment he did not foresee the long wave and the generative effects on the innovations that

Fig. 2. Ettore Sottsass, Vetri Memphis, lithography.



would follow. Innovations that would have also involved the sphere of bio-technological research.

The digital revolution had the effects of a seismic event, transforming the world profoundly from within, affecting interpersonal and working relationships, the material world as well as the immaterial one; finally, it changed the nature of things: “we are faced with a universe dominated by other ‘things’, not abstract and immaterial phenomena, but lumps of structured matter, solid presences called to interact not only with the body, but also with the mind, not only with the senses, but also with the thought” [Vitta 2015, p. 100].

Digital colonizes technological systems by continually creating new species and instantly extinguishing pre-existing products, in an energetically and technologically self-powered process perfectly described by Zygmunt Bauman: “*perpetuum mobile*: a self-sustained and self-sufficient contraption, containing everything needed to remain in continuous, uninterrupted movement, to be eternally on the move, needing no further outside boost to stay in motion, no stimulus, push or pull, no intervention of an external outside force, no input of new energy” [Bauman 2012, p. 55].

We are in a mature phase of the digital revolution in which, from the dematerialization of objects, we have arrived at the dematerialization of actions: we open the front door and pay for what we buy with the same smartphone that performs other functions.

At the same time we are wedged in a dimension of human action between immateriality and materiality, in a continuous reference; as Olga Goriunova states: “there is no point in designing a system, be a data system or a house, if it cannot practically and actively affect things, outside of its immediate materiality” [Goriunova 2016, p. 334].

For Goriunova we produce intangible technologies to generate materiality which, in turn, will generate a new humanity and a new action.

Byung-Chul Han, one of the contemporary philosophers who wrote important contributions on the digital transition, says: “through this medium [digital, editor’s note] we are re-programmed, without fully understanding this radical paradigm shift. We struggle behind the digital medium which, acting under the level of conscious decision, decisively modifies our behavior, our perception, our sensitivity, our thinking, our living together. Today we are intoxicated by the digital medium, without being able to fully evaluate the consequences of such an inebriation. This blindness

and simultaneous numbness represent the crisis of our day” [Han 2015, p. 9].

The blindness to which Han mentions is undoubtedly due to the technological condition in which we are immersed, but it is also generated by the compression of time that characterizes contemporary action. There is also a technological determinism that gives the design a very strong and, in some ways, pervasive aesthetic matrix.

The techno-determinist perspective and digital humanities

The relationship between design, drawing and new technologies always produces many formal, aesthetic and content implications. The parametric approach to the project –necessary for the production with 3D printing processes based on additive and augmentative principles– has generated an induced aesthetic that homogenizes the artifacts both from a formal and design point of view: “we are witnessing a proliferation of seats, tables, bookcases and even footwear that refer, without any logical, conceptual or functional link, to the structure of bones, cells, to mathematical logics such as the Voronoi, whose tessellation resolves itself in the decomposition of a metric space given by the distances with respect to a certain discrete set of elements of space: for example, points or fractals” [Langella, Santulli 2017, p. 17].

In this case drawing coincides with the project, determined by the parametric methodology and 3D manufacturing.

A very case in point was offered by the exhibition *Out of hand. Materializing the Postdigital* (MAD, Museum of Arts and Design, MAD, New York, 16 October 2013-1 June 2014); all the installations and objects visible in the exhibition demonstrate a strong aesthetic, structural and conceptual link caused by digital technologies. This demonstrates the non-neutrality of the digital environment, which can draw our thoughts and actions through a pre-determined architecture, a structure of meaning. As Floridi states: “ICTs are not just rebuilding our world: they are re-ontologizing it” [Floridi 2012, p. 13].

Also the new economy is based on the same techno-determinist model: “start-ups are typically based on the idea that a particular piece of technology will disrupt and reinvent some part of culture (or even nature). For example: Amazon and eBay reinvent retail, Instagram reinvents photography, You Tube and Netflix reinvent moving



Fig. 3. Schultz, Kotte, Zauner, Wilting, Eggert, *Rapid Racer*, 2011.

Fig. 4. Shane Kohatsu, *Nike Vapor Laser Talon*, 2013.

Fig. 5. Iris van Herpen, *Parametric dress*.



images, Facebook reinvents friendship, Airbnb reinvents hospitality, Bitcoins reinvents finance, and Google's artificial intelligence projects reinvent intelligence" [Cramer 2016, p. 125].

It would therefore seem that this techno-determinism has also profoundly changed the relationship between drawing and design, at least in the uncritical acceptance of digital technology.

A new asterism: the emergence of postdigital critical thinking

If digital, in its resemantization of the world, has reached the skin of objects, postdigital, through its own critical dimension, brings new meanings and open, collective and intelligent design visions, capable of involving people, territories and companies, starting from listening the needs expressed.

Today we talk about postdigital especially in reference to critical thinking, as a new 'asterism' opposed to the pervasiveness of digital; the need to bring man back to the center of the world's transformation processes is related to the need to design visions within which the project can assume meaning and transformative capacity in relation to emerging needs.

We are all in a condition that we can define as technobiological-cultural coevolution, in which technologies are not only immersive, but support man through the extension of his capabilities, while replacing the experience of reality. Media and digital representations "place themselves on an equal level as compared to the real object, making the appearance a being endowed with its own truth, whose origin must be sought in the technology that produces them" [Vitta 2012, p. 53].

Within this new condition, our material culture and perception of the world profoundly change: Lev Manovich refers to contemporary material culture as "digital materialism" [Manovich 2001, p. 27], in relation to the emergence of new collaborative models of industrial design and production promoted by new technologies.

In this sense, the disappearance of the word culture indicates that the representation of cultural expressions in the concretization of the world (artifacts) is mediated by the digital through its own specific expressive languages and architectures.

In this regards David M. Berry and Michael Dieter state: "we could think of this as the emergence of a project of extend and embrace, whereby the formerly proto-scientific logics of computation envelop and transform art and design into computational media. In doing so, art becomes programmable, and design becomes a function of computation» [Berry, Dieter 2015, p. 2].

In contemporary culture the design autonomy of Italian masters, that magical dimension of drawing in which the possible makes sense, seems to be conditioned by technology. Actually the critical aspect of postdigital thinking intervenes when faced with the new condition: the universe of Italian design, in fact, is made up of 'cultural objects', as result of an intense narration in dialogue with territories,

different contexts, different reasons. The socio-technical nature that characterizes a large part of international design excludes the symbolic and expressive dimension that gives the *élan vital* to the artifacts.

In the horizon of the described scenario design requires a close knowledge interaction and a strong critical dimension to orient possible futures and to curve development paths that seem pre-determined by technological trajectories.

In a universe dominated by mathematical metaphors, in which everything can be solved through a numerical container and its corresponding form, the return to the creation of value through meaning (the meaning creator of form) brings us closer to what has always characterized the various human civilizations and the related objects system.

Placing the values you believe in at the center of the project is automatically an act of human sharing and also an intention to give a real shape and direction to the future.

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