EDITED BY SALVATORE ZINGALE

DESIGN MEETS ALTERITY

CASE STUDIES, PROJECT
EXPERIENCES, COMMUNICATION
CRITICISM

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DESIGN DELLA COMUNICAZIONE | SAGGI OPEN ACCESS | 05

Design della comunicazione

La collana Design della comunicazione nasce per far emergere la densità del tessuto disciplinare che caratterizza questa area del progetto e per dare visibilità alle riflessioni che la alimentano e che ne definiscono i settori, le specificità, le connessioni. Nel grande sviluppo della cultura mediatica la presenza del Design della comunicazione è sempre più trasversale e in continua espansione. La comunicazione richiede un sapere progettuale là dove la cultura si fa editoria, dove i sistemi di trasporto si informatizzano, dove il prodotto industriale e i servizi entrano in relazione con l'utente. Il Design della comunicazione è in azione nella grande distribuzione dove il consumatore incontra la merce, nella musica, nello sport, nello spettacolo, nell'immagine delle grandi manifestazioni come nella loro diffusione massmediale. La collana è un punto di convergenza in cui registrare riflessioni, studi, temi emergenti; è espressione delle diverse anime che compongono il mondo della comunicazione progettata e delle differenti componenti disciplinari a esso riconducibili. Oggetto di studio è la dimensione artefattuale, in tutti i versanti del progetto di comunicazione: grafica editoriale, editoria televisiva, audiovisiva e multimediale, immagine coordinata d'impresa, packaging e comunicazione del prodotto, progettazione dei caratteri tipografici, web design, information design, progettazione dell'audiovisivo e dei prodotti interattivi, dei servizi e dei sistemi di comunicazione complessa, quali social network e piattaforme collaborative.

Accanto alla dimensione applicativa, l'attenzione editoriale è rivolta anche alla riflessione teorico-critica, con particolare riguardo alle discipline semiotiche, sociologiche e massmediologiche che costituiscono un nucleo portante delle competenze del designer della comunicazione.

La collana si articola in due sezioni. I SAGGI accolgono contributi teorici dai diversi campi disciplinari intorno all'area di progetto, come un'esplorazione sui fondamenti della disciplina. Gli SNODI ospitano interventi di raccordo disciplinare con il Design della comunicazione.

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Edited by Salvatore Zingale
Design Meets Alterity
Case Studies, Project Experiences, Communication Criticism

FrancoAngeli

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Design Meets Alterity

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Design and Alterity: a Dialogue to Be Built
Introduction

1. Why the encounter between design and alterity

The question of alterity – particularly in the last century, and increasingly with the processes of globalisation, migratory flows, and the drive to overcome discrimination and inequality – has become fundamental to the understanding of contemporary societies and their possible development, as well as to the understanding of complex societies in continuous transformation. The tools of global communication have gradually made multiple aspects of cultural diversity known. A problematic and contradictory consequence – but at the same time a potential asset – is the emergence of multicultural, multi-ethnic, and intersectional societies and communities.

Contemporary societies are thus increasingly confronted with that which is *other than oneself*, with that which poses questions that one is not accustomed to answering, and with that which poses itself as a term of contradiction, questioning established certainties and beliefs. Thus, the question of alterity has gradually become pervasive: the *Other* is, as psychoanalysis teaches, also within the obscurities of the *Self*, of consciousness.

At the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano, we first addressed these issues in a series of online meetings in June 2021, with scholars from different philosophical and scientific disciplines,[1] and then with theoretical essays in an Italian volume that appeared in this same series in 2022.[2] We will now attempt to complete these two initiatives by adding to them a series of contributions more ori-

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[1] Available here: <https://www.designealterita.polimi.it/incontri/>.

[2] Available here: <https://series.francoangeli.it/index.php/oa/catalog/book/825>.

ented towards design practice, particular case studies, and a critical view of communication. The question of alterity, in fact, requires it to be experienced and lived out in the midst of social action.

2. Two dimensions of alterity

Of interest here – that is, in its encounter with the design sciences – are two dimensions of alterity: the *epistemological* dimension, which answers the question "how can we know"; and the *ethical* dimension, which answers the question "how should we act". Both questions affect the activity of design. The epistemological dimension is in fact driven to explore what lies beyond our limits, in "other territory", and calls into question both the forms of knowledge of problematic reality and the methodological processes that lead to design invention. The ethical dimension, which in several respects coexists with the epistemological one, leads the designer to the encounter and confrontation with subjects who are inevitably *other than us*: not only those who come from distant cultures who we presume to know with our "Eurocentric" superficiality, but also those with whom we share history and traditions, because alterity is an anthropological character that constitutes humanity and animality itself. Indeed, playing with the difference between noun and adjective, we can define the *Other* as that which is constitutively *other* than what we think it is. In both of the two dimensions summarised here, reflection on alterity requires both a sharpening of cognitive activity (and for the designer, approaching his work with a greater inventive disposition) and a disposition to recognise cultural universes that elude "obvious knowledge".

Otherness is therefore a field yet to be explored, especially when one wants to move from theoretical reflection, which is inevitable and necessary, to transformative praxis. Otherness is a field of research and challenge that allows for "epistemological ruptures" and "inventive leaps", and its manifestations are diverse. For science, it is the unknown to be known, the universe of possibilities. For the human and social sciences, it is the progressive discovery of human complexity – of the interiority of the person and the dialogue between cultures – which does not allow itself to be rigidly enshrined

in uncritically valid and immutable forms of thought and beliefs. For the life sciences (biological and biosemiotic), it is the realisation of what "other minds" (such as the animal world) can teach us once we abandon all pretensions to anthropocentrism.

In fact, reflection on alterity inevitably leads to the abandonment of all pretensions to *centrism*, because it places every subjectivity in a network of relationships devoid of hierarchies and supremacies. In concrete terms, the acceptance of a culture founded on the recognition of alterity and the reciprocal responsibility that this requires, leads to the abandonment of anthropocentrism and androcentrism, but also of Eurocentrism and logocentrism (i.e., the domination of a few forms of communication and signification over all others). If accepted and experienced in full, alterity is perhaps the way to glimpse the overcoming of national conflicts, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and all sorts of rigid, uncritical, and immovable identities. These and other cases of supremacy can be defined as pathological forms of social living, where the dialectic of diversity is replaced by the prevalence of vested interests and an exercise of power.

3. Design and Alterity

Design does not have the power to directly change this state of affairs, at least as long as it is thought of primarily as an aid to the production of goods and commodities. However, it could have the possibility of affecting what is defined as "common sense" if we start from the idea that artefacts, especially when they are charged with symbolic and communication values, are bearers of meaning, vehicles of values, and promoters of beliefs. Indeed, the *meaning* of an artefact lies not only within its visual and material configuration, but above all in its practical consequences. Artefacts are cultic traces and expressions of ideologies. Artefacts are the *human imprint* left by the way we conceive our relationship with the *Umwelt*. Each artefact is a part of the narrative of how throughout history we have conceived and thus constructed this relationship. The shape of cities, technical tools, clothing, the production of images and writing, and every other kind of artefact is a chapter in this narrative.

Today, it is legitimate to think that the design dimension can also undertake research paths that highlight the need to recognise the *Other* in different social and cultural contexts: from migratory flows to gender cultures, from social fragility to mental health, from cultural distances to the difficulties of social integration, etc. Design, in fact, possesses the appropriate tools to promote innovative and open visions of relations between people, peoples, and languages. Moreover, in design culture it is increasingly evident that the production of artefacts and services does not end with the satisfaction of a need, nor does it concern only the exercise of aesthetics or functionality. Artifacts are also vehicles of worldviews, beliefs, and cultural prejudices.

If design has thus often implicitly dealt with alterity and addressed its themes and problems, especially in projects concerning the contexts of social coexistence and quality of life, it can still develop a design vision in dialogue with other fields, from philosophy to anthropology, from aesthetics to literary theory, and from cultural studies to ethology. Engaging design research on alterity can thus lead to the discovery of *fields of possibility* to be traversed, starting with the question: What tools and what actions, both mental and practical, can we develop in order to establish and cultivate relationships with the alterity of the contemporary world?

The essays collected in this volume certainly do not exhaust the complexity of themes inherent to the question of alterity. They should be seen as a starting act, as a stimulus to further highlight a field of research – convinced that in the exploration of alterity, design can only thrive.

Case Studies, Project Experiences, Communication Criticism

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Media Representations, between Androcentrism and Alterity

1. The androcentric gaze

The forms of representation of women conveyed by communication arte-facts, and by the media system as a whole, constitute a ground for reflection to study the relationships and the effects they have on the construction of individual and collective biographies, which influence the perception of the Self and of the Other (de Beauvoir 1949; Ghisleni 2004; Heller 2017; Capecchi 2018).

When one reflects on images, in fact, one thinks about *visual texts* that present themselves as the result of a process of *figuration*. A process that passes through a principle of emphasis and exclusion and which restores, precisely through the translational passage of the representation, a certain image of the "female" or the "male" giving visibility to two notions considered as *reciprocal alterity*, both determined by the interpretative filter of the him or her that generate them.[1]

At the same time we reason on the value conveyed by the representation within the media circuit, a representation that sanctions the existence of the protagonist, that is, at the moment in which the image finds space in the media scene and becomes the bearer of a social affirmation (Pinotti and Somaini 2016). And if, as Costa (2011: 121-122) recalls, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that there is a relationship if, and only if, a being feels watched by another being – when they feel the gaze of the other on themself –, we can believe that the representation of a subject in the media scene is the condition which guarantees the gaze of others on them and, therefore, which certifies their existence vis-à-vis the other, thus contrib-

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[1]   The reasoning starts from the dominance of a binary model "M-F" which, culturally, has rooted forms and conventions referring to the two universes and assumed, more generally, as points of reference even where one wants to promote other models.

uting, through the various forms of staging, to formulate the manifestations of genre.[2]

In this framework, the notion of alterity allows us to reflect on the forms of representation of women in the media, addressing the discourse starting from some recurrences in which alterity is substantiated. In examining the notion, we can in fact formulate distinctions and circumscribe what I have called forms of *denied*, *violated*, *distorted*, *relegated*, *silenced* alterity and which I will introduce below.

It is a reflection that moves from an androcentric vision, in which men are considered as the "human race" and women as "other".

Androcentrism, as is known, functions to sustain and reinforce the power of men in society, therefore, it fosters gender inequality by disguising the masculinity of the male gender under the rubric of the *neutral standard* (Bem 1993; Bailey, LaFrance and Dovidio 2019). It corresponds to a principle of *separation* which indicates the division of male and female as opposite principles to which is correlated that of *hierarchy*, which considers the male as a *norm* including the world with respect to a female which is determined, however, as a *deviation from the norm* (Bucchetti 2021).

To designate the phenomenon we speak of *male as norm* (MAN), of *universal male*, of *man as default* (Kotthoff and Wodak 1997), up to the point of indicating the "false neutrality" of the male when «passing off as universal what is only of man» (Sabatini 1987). These are all expressions that imply the female *alterity*, and whose effects fall on every area of our social and cultural dimension, and which we can verify precisely through the analysis of some *clusters* of images, useful for identifying the "excluding matrices". These are matrices that contribute to fuelling disparity and gender inequalities, which cancel the existence of identities themselves or harness them, stiffen them, confine them, thus giving rise to crystallized and stereotypical sets.

Therefore, the role played by communication design and its responsibilities is at the centre of the discussion: through the design of artefacts, cultural

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[2]   Representation on the media scene contributes to the construction of gender models since images always assign us skills, a theme which, as Cristina Demaria recalls, concerns each of us, in the moment in which every day we carry out the *performance* that allows us to put on stage our "manifestation" of gender. (Reference is made to Demaria's speech in the Design and Alterity 2021 cycle of seminars: "Alterity and gender cultures: the semiotic gaze" <https://www.designealterita.polimi.it/incontri/cristina-demaria> (11 August 2021).

contents, identities, social relationships, lifestyles are defined which see the project as interpreter and witness of the ways in which a society designs itself and structures itself (Papanek 1971; Baule and Bucchetti 2012; Resnick 2019).

2. Denied alterity

When *male as norm* (MAN) prevails, what is implemented is a form of denial of alterity which appeals to that notion of *neuter* which alludes to an original duality, of which only one side has been able to develop, however, with the pretext of being the only one possible.

I will give some examples to be clearer. If in a newspaper, to illustrate an article dealing with educational experiments in a high school context, I choose, with the sole purpose of figuratively anticipating the theme, an opening photo that portrays four male teenagers caught on the starting blocks, ready to compete, in terms of the production of meaningful effects, what I produce is an inference between the object of experimentation and the reality that promotes it, interpreting the experience described as exclusively male. In this way no mental association with the female is activated: the universe to which we refer, through the image, is exclusively male.

Similarly, if to illustrate an article on the longevity of the human being I opt for an illustration in which male figures are put in sequence, represented with all the distinctive features (truthful elements, physical details, clothing) that characterize the different age groups, I shape a portrayal that completely excludes women from the iconic narrative. Just as, every time in schematization processes, for example to iconographically describe the composition of the members of an organization, I choose pictogrammatic representations based on male figures, underlined by formal details such as a jacket and tie, I am making a choice that does not speak of "human beings" who play a certain specific role, but of males, denying the recipients of the message even the possibility of prefiguring the presence of women, who are completely excluded from the discourse. The reasons are to be found in the nature of the visual statements which respond to a principle that refers to its referent, and this happens, in a particularly evident way, when the level of detail of the image is higher. That is: the higher the level of iconicity, the greater the adherence to the object in question.

We are faced with cases in which the visual text conveys the "male" by denying the existence of the "female". In which man is used as the measure

of things: a principle evident in language and linguistic structures (Violi 1986; Demaria [2019] 2003); in the Italian language the male is used as a universal neuter, hiding the power gap between men and women, and thus reproducing a social order.

According to the principle of *male as a norm*, male linguistic bias works to exclude and deny women and their role. And more precisely, the same grammatical and semantic asymmetries, which punctuate the language making it "sexist" in the general unawareness of the speaker (Sabatini 1987; Robustelli 2012), can be found at the base of the iconization mechanisms, in the context of the design of visual statements when they translate into figure as Pierre Bourdieu said:

The strength of the male order is measured by the fact that it does not have to justify itself: the anthropocentric vision imposes itself as neutral and does not need to be expressed in discourses aimed at legitimizing it. The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the male domination on which it is based. (Bourdieu 1998: 17-18, author's translation)

3. Violated alterity

Perhaps one of the most obvious categories is constituted by what I have defined as *violated alterity*; within this notion are included representations of women that show the female body deprived, in various ways, of her dignity. The reference, on the one hand, is to the images in which the woman is communicatively "used" as a *sexual object*. Images which, as is known, constitute a crucial[3] question and which are the result of a hypersexual culture, grown according to a widespread model of hypertrophic communication which has amplified, distorted, repeated to the point of obsession, a female portrait that has reached the point of fixity, in which the exposed body responds to seductive logics and porno-soft codes.

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[3]   A theme subject to study and interventions on various scales and in various fields: see the European Resolutions (European Resolution 2008/2038 (INI), European Resolution 2012/2116 (INI), European Resolution 2017/2210 (INI)); the 2013 conference "Media and the Image of Women" (Conference of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission); studies in the legislative, sociological, semiotic fields and in the field of communication design: D'Amico (2020), Migliucci (2013), Giomi and Magaraggia (2017), Cosenza (<giovannacosenza.wordpress.com>), Bucchetti (2012, 2015, 2016, 2021); the actions promoted by groups of activists and associations such as Lorella Zanardo (2010) and DonneinQuota.

The women, in this case, are portrayed according to a principle of exaltation of faces and bodies, based on which the direction criteria are subordinated to the emphasis on anatomical details and the creation of explicit references to the sexual sphere. The echo of pornography expands into non-pornographic culture (McNair 2013), the fragmentation of visual signs, symbols and verbal expressions typical of porn, migrate and contaminate mainstream culture according to a principle of heteronormativity, from *pre-orgasmic* expressions,[4] to references to fellatio or *facial cumshots*.[5] Explicit or allusive depictions, frequently flanked (or sometimes replaced) by verbal forms that reinforce the references through expressions that mortify the woman ("Trust me... I'll give it to you for free", "Put it at 90 degrees", ...[6]) not only for the content they convey, but for the underlying declaration: the presence of a subject who feels entitled to make these statements is nothing but the sign of further verbal violence.

Observing the media context, it is easy to check to what extent the drift described pervades the various sectors: the advertising sphere, as well as the universe of music videos or television entertainment, but also the information field (just think, in sports information, to shots reserved for female athletes).

But alongside the infinite cases of soft-porn portrayal, we can also include other forms of violated alterity. Among these I want to mention the *female mannequins*,[7] portrayed in expressionless poses and depicted as inanimate objects, marked by the fixity of the gaze and, more generally, all the women shown *lifeless*, face down, fainted, deprived of any vital trait, to name a few more recurring forms of posing that populate the iconography, for ex-

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[4]   Thus are defined the forms of portrayal that show the woman with facial expressions attributable to those found during orgasm, according to what emerged from a study published in the «Journal of Nonverbal Behavior» which gives an account of an experiment carried out to identify the "Prevailing Action Units" thanks to the use of the Facial Action Coding System – FACS.

[5]   *Facial cumshot* is an English slang term that refers to the sexual practice in which a man directs his ejaculation onto his partner's face. An example can be found in the photographic image created by Terry Richardson for the 2007 Sisley "Fashion Junkie" campaign.

[6]   These are just some of the many examples of communication campaign *headlines* that have given rise to city billboards.

[7]   See the research *Come la pubblicità racconta le donne e gli uomini, in Italia*, conducted by Massimo Guastini (Italian Art Directors Club) with Giovanna Cosenza, Jennifer Colombari, Elisa Gasparri (Alma Mater University, Bologna) <https://youmark-images.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/23201455/Come-la-pubblicità-racconta-gli-italiani.pdf>, online on 4 January 2024.

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ample, in the field of fashion[8] and which seem to have become the stylistic hallmark of many photographic services.

Women posed to be there available, ready to be used, enjoyed, consumed: objects in front of a gaze (first the photographic lens, then the recipient's eye) that frisks their bodies and, also for this reason, violated.

4. Distorted alterity

In gender representation there are visual statements that express, instead, a "distortion" of alterity.

Once again, the observation of the women depicted in the communication campaigns returns a repertoire of images useful for broadening the reflection, focusing attention on the women portrayed as *emotional*. We are faced with a further example of discriminatory representation (Goffman 1976; Bucchetti 2012; Scanu 2012; Nadotti 2015) capable of demeaning women.

The advertising field provides many cases concerning different product sectors, more or less popular brands, of national and international importance, referring to consumer products, services, promotions, cultural initiatives. More precisely, I want to dwell on a specific *type* that falls into this category, i.e. on the images that portray *amazed women* (Bucchetti 2021).

This *cliché* sees the woman portrayed with her eyes wide open, wide open, wide-eyed and open mouth, with her hands on the sides of her face to mark her mood. She is an astounded, amazed, bewildered, surprised woman,[9] shown in a state in which the irrational aspects prevail and in which an approach that excludes logic and rationality a priori is privileged, in which, that is, the woman is deprived of her awareness.

On the one hand we can observe how this type of image is relegated to the field of representation, lacks referentiality, being difficult to refer to experiences or situations experienced in everyday social contexts. On the other hand, it is useful to underline how we are not dealing only with a

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[8]   There are numerous cases in this sense. Just as an example, I mention the advertising campaign launched in France by *Maison Saint Laurent* on the occasion of the Autumn/Winter 2017-18 collection, during *Paris Fashion Week*: the key image of the campaign was at the centre of the controversy precisely for having depicted a woman in a pose of evident submission (as well as for the excessive thinness of the model).

[9]   The depiction of facial expressions, which today finds its focus in the category of *bewildered* people, was studied by Goffman. See, in particular, the text on *Gender advertisements*, also *licensed withdrawal*, in which representations of moods such as fear or laughter are analysed.

cliché, but with representations of emotions that have an implicit effect. In advertising communications, women more than men are depicted in involvements that psychologically remove them from the social situation, leaving them disoriented and, presumably, as Goffman (1976 [1987]: 57) recalls, dependent on the protection and goodwill of others who are (or could be) present or implicated in the narrative.

These forms of *distorted alterity* do not only concern the adult woman, we can in fact find the same compositional system in the representation of young girls. What derives from this is the affirmation of a female figure who, since childhood, does not seem to be sufficiently equipped to face reality, on whose face an expression is regularly imprinted that translates into the ingenuity of those who are amazed in the face of the obvious.

In fact, gestures, expressions, postures reveal not only how we feel but, through their impact, contribute to a process of normalization, together with the disposition of embodied cultural values across the scene.

5. Relegated alterity

In her text *De senectute* about the male universal, Francesca Rigotti states: «Man is the all-embracing human being. He is the anthropological universal. Then, perhaps, as its extension and emanation, beside, behind, below, somewhere, flattened on its physical, biological, bodily condition, there is also the woman» (2018: 14).

And it is precisely starting from this idea of "extension" and "emanation" that I want to introduce the *relegated alterity* that we can recognize whenever we are faced with logics pursued, for example, in the context of so-called *gendered marketing*. That is when, in the universe of products, those without specific markers are implicitly addressed to the male gender, while a female version is added to them, interpreted and translated according to the canons of the so-called "for her" (Bucchetti 2016).

The product designed for female consumers, which would not require any type of specific variation, either ergonomically or functionally, as in the well-known case of the *Bic for her* ballpoint pen,[10] thus represents one *of*

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[10] A product created to differentiate itself from the standard through an aesthetic variation of finish and colour, made explicit through the expression "for her" alongside the name plus the "sleek design" declared on the packaging.

which, an interpretation of the one designed for men, becoming expression of an androcentrism that tends to mark the female gender more than the male, even when it includes categories and groups in which men and women are equally represented.

Using the language of Bem (1993), women are considered, even in this case, a specific sex in relation to men who instead represent the neutral.

The interpretation of the products, which is often based on the translation process entrusted to *pinkification* (Bucchetti 2016: 110), as Silvia Pizzocaro recalls, in many cases «also expresses a lowering of the cultural level, of language. As if the gender version of the object corresponded to a more commercial version, to a low-level object, of poor quality to the point of being channelled into the dimension of kitsch».[11] But it also has to do with the contents that are reworked to be themed according to the inclinations considered proper to the female universe. An example for all: a quiz game, catalogued among educational and scientific games,[12] which provides for the "*girl*" interpretation in which the repertoire of objects on which the game is structured changes, in which clothing, accessories, footwear of various shapes take the place of natural elements, sweets and games that accompany the male version instead.

6. Silenced alterity

With the last category, that of silenced alterity, the perspective is reversed. In fact, there is a gap: the absence of mature, elderly, old women (Moretti 2012; Casnati 2022) who, in the universe of media representation, are ignored and therefore silenced. An absence that draws attention to the phenomenon of *ageism*, a term used to describe, more generally, the discriminatory attitudes based on the age of a group of individuals (mature and elderly), and which confronts us with the one that Rigotti (2018: 13-14) – referring to what Susan Sontag wrote – defines the "double discrimination", for which the old woman suffers the "double standard of ageing": if ageing is difficult for everyone, for women it is a little more so.

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[11]   We report an observation that emerged during the dialogue on "gender and design cultures" published in the volume *Design and gender dimension. A field of research and reflection between project cultures and gender cultures* (2015).

[12]   Reference is made to the educational and scientific games of the Clementoni Sapientino line, the *talking Sapientino* and the "*girl*" *Sapientino*.

It is an issue fuelled by the forms of representation conveyed by the media, which support and increase the obsession with youth and the denial of ageing; a question that makes almost understandable:

[...] the aesthetic diligence of some women on themselves: women who prefer to strive to maintain the image of youthful beauty, rather than resign themselves to entering that devalued world. Women who can't stand the idea of becoming invisible, ostracized or pitied. (Rigotti 2018: 64)

A phenomenon that also manifests itself in other ways. For example, in the *Teenile* (a term that comes from the crasis between *teenager* and *senile*) or in the distinctly commercial one of the *Quinq'ados*, the "fifty-year-old adolescents" for whom, in the field of clothing, adolescent sizes and shapes are adapted to the build of women, responding to the idea that women in their fifties should always be looking for an age that is now behind them.[13]

In a society that places the body and physical attractiveness at the centre of female question, when women lose the characteristic features of youth, they also lose their role, thus becoming invisible. The case relating to Hillary Clinton's presidential run for the White House was emblematic. When, following the spread on the web of some of her *candid* close-ups of her face, that is, not "posed" or retouched, the candidate was fiercely attacked by violent criticism because she appeared too old.[14] Awakening offences that reaffirm discriminatory and harmful principles based on the "natural" qualities that man's ageing implies – seriousness, authority, wisdom, credibility, charm, etc. –, compared with the disaster that instead affects the woman with whom decay, contempt, degradation, drying up are associated (Caputo 2009; Murgia 2011; Rigotti 2018; Cantarella 2019).

According to a study on the media representation of the female figure, male individuals and young people would be privileged (although this

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[13] See Francesca Casnati's work entitled *Anti-ageism. The media and age: a gender obsession* (Master's degree thesis, supervisor Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, Politecnico di Milano, a.y. 2015-2016).

[14] See what was reported on the case by the newspaper *la Repubblica* from the pen of Vittorio Zucconi: <https://www.repubblica.it/2007/12/sezioni/esteri/usa-hillary-rughe/usa-hillary-rughe/usa-hillary-rughe.html>, online on 4 January 2024.

does not happen only in the media), to the detriment of women who have passed their youth (Lipperini 2010).

The invisibility of the no longer young woman[15] is perpetrated, with only a few exceptions that seem to constitute the only models in which her presence is admissible:[16] on the one hand, the narratives in which she is called to promote products or services for the elderly (moreover through the interpretation of decidedly younger women compared to the age group to which they are addressed), on the other hand when she is called to play the role of the *grandmother* or the *old nutcase*, responding, in this case, to *clichés* that ridicule the figures of elderly women turning them into real caricatures.

7. Media space and public space

As I have reasoned, there are different discriminatory forms conveyed by images, representations of alterity which, in various ways, do not recognize it but violate or cancel its specificity.

Each of them constitutes an iconic act that has an effect on the subjects for whom it is intended, influencing with its own statement so that it can acquire a certain habit of behaviour (Bredekamp 2010) and, therefore, contributing to disseminate and promote distorting models, incapable of restoring the plurality of reality.

The media space offers models; the images we perceive, what we see, structure our experience of the world contributing to the construction of collective memory, but also influencing the ways of meeting, of being put in contact with the other. The media spaces we inhabit therefore express our experience of alterity.

Public space is recognized as having the value of allowing individuals to interact through discussion (Arendt 1958), of encouraging encounters with the other and, therefore, of space that allows me to discover who I am. But if we admit the parallelism between public space and media space, the limits of the picture examined show up clearly. When the media space acts through the reiteration of partial and crystallized models, it denies a plural

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[15]   I deliberately chose the expression "no longer young" to include all the different age groups, up to old age.
[16]   See what has been published by Kite, Deaux and Miele (1991).

public space, capable of guaranteeing the recognition of alterity and, consequently, of being functional to the encounter with the other.

The theme of recognition (Honneth 1992) and the theme of the forms of depicting women are linked in a media space that must be able to make space for knowledge, negotiation, but also for the construction of the *we*, of plurality, of alterity.

What has been considered up to now leads us to affirm the importance of the observation work still to be done around the "excluding matrices", to investigate every form of visual statement that contributes to fuelling gender disparity and inequalities, therefore to place at the centre of this reasoning the role of communication design which must know how to disciplinarily strengthen the processes that characterize it, raising the awareness of male and female designers with respect to the *normative* function of which images are the bearers.

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Editorial Translations, Forms of Otherness
Communication Design as Writing
of the Other. The Cultural Turning Point
of Independent Magazines

1. Translation and otherness

Communication design as an act of translation moves fully and constitutively within the scenarios of otherness. It comes to terms with nuclei of otherness that deeply mark its disciplinary statute. If in general, as the main distinctive feature, communication design seems aimed at the continuous construction of dialogic positions through the artefacts that belong to it, there are nevertheless aspects that return its relationship with the dimensions of otherness in terms of greater complexity. One of these is precisely the close relationship between design and translation.

The *translation paradigm* and its declinations in the field of design have in fact highlighted aspects of theoretical awareness that have now clearly established themselves also in application terms (Baule and Caratti 2016a, 2016b).

For two main reasons. In the first place, because designed communication, *communicative translation*, is already in itself a framework that synthesizes *other* languages, different from each other, through a sort of uninterrupted "internal" translation: what we can consider an exercise of first-level otherness.

Secondly, because communication, in its inherent mission of outward projection, by generating its own devices, becomes something *other* to reach the *other* and/or to talk *about the other* – or *with the other*. At this dual level, the point of view of otherness continually emphasizes the asymmetry inherent in the communication process and marks it structurally. The translational tension of project communication then confirms communication as a structured system of otherness in the most diverse meanings. And if communication is based on this dense network of tensions in the field of otherness, on closer inspection it is precisely this system of otherness that makes it flexible and available for its primary function, for

conversation with the *other* rather than pure transmission.[1] In this light, communication design can be reconsidered according to a double line of investigation, converging in several parts, which we will try to express here. The first is related to the very structure of communicative discourse; the second, of a thematic type, exemplifies *where* and *how* the design line of otherness is exemplarily expressed in terms of content, as is the case with independent magazines, a historically privileged medium in the field of *other* cultures.

2. For a map of communicative otherness

As far as the structural and process aspects are concerned, if communication in itself presents itself as a place of intersection between *other* languages that must meet – their destiny is the *meeting* –, communication techniques as such are confirmed as a truly translational field. Let's think, in this regard, of the nature of *mixed media* (Mitchell 2018: 135): it deals in an essential way with the intersemiotic plane starting from the text-image dialectic – object of the studies on the *imagetext* (*ibidem*) –; it is confirmation of the principle of "coherent tension of opposites", that form of «continuous transition between opposites» where «opposites never cease to "communicate" with each other in a structural unity» (Jullien 2018: 49). It is the intermediary nature of communication, which digitization has decisively brought to the fore, that acquires particular emphasis in the hybrid devices that are dominant today.

The communicative artefacts, as they belong to the intermediate[2] circuit and are the result of *remediation* processes (Bolter and Grusin 1999) – *other media* that conflict, quote, meet – in turn only refer to the intrinsic nature of translation and the game of the otherness implicit in the production processes of communication. They bear witness to that «media life form»

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[1] «[...] communicating is not transmitting. In spite of dictionaries which monotonously, because they are prisoners of the same prejudice, define communication as transmission, in the etymology of the word communicating there is no reference to transmitting, there is instead the *cum*, the *communis*, the common and the community, and above all there is the *munus*, the gift and/or reciprocal obligation that concerns subjects who share a common place» (Ronchi 2008: 200).

[2] «[...] the audiovisual paradigm I am thinking of rests on the assumption that, only by starting from an active comparison between the various technical formats of the image (optical and digital, for example), can one do justice to the irreducible otherness of the real world and proof of the facts, media and otherwise, that happen there» (Montani 2010: XII).

(Montani 2010: 13) which sees one medium inside another, up to the effects of fusion and immediacy of the immersive experience defined as *hypermediation* (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 99).

Even the level of the image act pushes today, in full digital mode, to investigate the consequences of the infinite manipulability of images as a sort of intra-semiotic short circuit; up to touching the hypothetical fall of the «referential performance of images» (Montani 2010: 20) which necessarily affects the very status of images, their power to refer to *other*, as is evident in the debate on *photography* (Marra 2006; Fontcuberta 2018).

Or yet again. The boundaries of the image relating to the *offscreen* (Guerra 2020) and, more generally, the *communicative offscreen*, function at the same time as a concealment but also as a disclosure of the *other* through the *pressure of the offscreen (ibidem)*. The *other*, ousted from the frame, without showing themself speaks to us with their absence.

If the question of otherness, understood as distance or detachment from *reality*, questions the referential pact of images and of communication *tout court*, therefore their documentary consistency, can also suggest communicative outcomes such as the interdependence between fiction and documentation (Martinengo 2021) in info-narrative formats. But above all it pushes us to question ourselves about that *debt of testimony* that Ricoeur reminds us of (1985: 214) i.e. the «testimonial commitment (the debt of the image towards its other)» (Montani 2010: XIV).

Or: in identity design (*identity design, naming,* etc.), when the communicative device names the *other* by imposing a name, even in strictly functional versions such as *brand identity*, it tends to resolve aspects of otherness by approving them. Moreover, for example in the field of toponymy, it would be «of great cognitive value for the theory of terrestrial globalization if we could have a detailed history of the policy of geographical denomination of the last five centuries. […] It could also represent the way in which the semantic side of that dis-estrangement from the world that Europeans had instinctively practised together with naming, unfolded in the history of world names» (Sloterdijk 2014: 854, authors' translation).

Even the theoretical assumption of *interface design* (Anceschi 1993) highlights communication as a diaphragmatic device, a system that connects, maintaining their separateness, two spheres, two worlds with each *other*. The communicative project insinuates itself into the interstice between

these two areas, connecting them in their distinction. This confirms that the *devices of otherness*, by their constitutive nature and by referential tension, have a strong threshold potential. Furthermore, it is the design of the interface that introduces us to the aspects of communicative interaction. Communication design appears as a whole, at least on a methodological level, as a *tactical* knowledge, where «tactics has as its place just that of the other» (De Certeau 1980: 72 et seq., authors' translation), where the relationship with the other is a vocation for doubling, resulting in an ubiquitous accent.

The design process of communication design itself can be read as a continuous dialogue with the *other*, and in a double form: the *other within themself* of the designer who, as the first addressee, wonders about the effectiveness of languages and devices which they put into practice; then, with the simulation of an *other* recipient, the hypothesis of a target *other than themself*. If *target* is, for those who plan communication, the framing of an objective outside of itself, the gaze that aims at a clearly identifiable *other*, a critique of the *target* as a standardized construction of the other, pursuit of the other through stereotyping is nevertheless required (see for example Bassetti 2008). The beneficial training of the communication designer also follows: that oriented to the constant exercise of going *beyond oneself* – the peculiar sensitivity that distinguishes them from pure artistic practice –, oriented to the recognition and deconstruction of a *communicative self* often smuggled as an expression of the right to authorship, devoted to self-referentiality where the sense of the *other* fails.

The design of artefacts and communication systems is therefore a practice that constitutively and incessantly confronts the dimension of the *other*, measures itself by necessity with the *original debt*, the *fracture*, the *waste* (Jullien 2018). Assuming this perspective, communication design is called on to design *devices for otherness*. Therefore, in its processes, it presupposes a continuous exercise on the level of otherness, in relation to which a map, albeit provisional, could be drawn, a *map of communicative otherness*.

In the statute of communication design, otherness is not only the possible object of communication but it is the subject that roots its deep structure. If this intrinsic interrelationship between communication project and otherness is not grasped, there is the risk of an exclusive standardisation in terms of content. Instead, it is in the depths of the device of communica-

tion itself, in the structure of the individual artefacts, that the dialectic of otherness is already at work, in turn representing the drive towards a continuous negotiation of the limits of communication.

On a general level, communication design can then be assimilated to the *writing forms of the other* (De Certeau 2005); consequently, with the communicative translation a relationship is established with the *other* in a pact of mutual understanding. *Editorial translation*, as a form of content, and therefore an integral part of communication design, should then be understood as an act of hospitality (Jabès 1991): a language that becomes *other* to reach out and recognize the *other*. Just as the *other communication* and the *other publishing*, like all forms of counter-communication, have been placed for over half a century as an expression of dissident thought dedicated to other contents – or "counter-cultures" (see Eco 1972). Starting from these considerations, in the context of editorial design products, those artefacts belonging to the area of independent magazines that make otherness their communication axis appear emblematic. Where, as has been said, the *other* is not only "described" or prefigured but is "inscribed" in the communicative act itself.

3. Reference context and classification criteria

That independent magazines represent the principle of otherness with respect to a dominant culture is an established fact. The experimental nature of the formats, the quality of the media (the paper size is one of the most characterizing elements), the refinement of the verbal-visual languages, alongside a careful, critical and reflective treatment of topics, are the characterizing elements that qualify a publishing sector, very vital internationally. Independent magazines represent an alternative from a temporal point of view: they do not experience the time compression of mainstream magazines, they can choose to operate at different speeds (issues can even transcend rigid programming times) and on different scales. They have no limitations even from a spatial point of view, both in material and immaterial form. Over the last decade, not only have new publications arisen and are being generated every day in the most disparate areas of the world, but also physical places and online points of sale have multiplied.

The whole of magazines to refer to has expanded and the visibility of small-circulation projects has increased. The editorial offices can have

a position linked to a specific geographical context, or they can be made up of subjects who interact remotely with contents and purposes of common interest. The topics dealt with and the areas of reference are varied, but more focused, and often come together in a cultural programme declared in the form of a manifesto; the readers themselves form small communities defined thematically and interested in specialized content (Marcadent 2020: 57).

Within the rich panorama of independent editorial proposals, we have identified some magazines that come from situations or countries that are generally underrepresented or that do not represent themselves. This assumption has allowed us to grasp different translation methods, beyond the limits of the Western imagination and beyond any type of racial prejudice.

In this contribution we summarize a series of editorial projects aimed at affirming the concept of identity or cultural diversity, moved by a desire for redemption and as an alternative to a limiting vision in which «the other is a distinct plurality» (Arduini 2020: 42).

The criteria with which we analysed the magazines are linked to four possible paths of cultural interaction (Burke 2008) in terms of: *cultural homogenization*, *resistance*, *biculturality* and *hybridization*. These categories derive from a different vision of the world and from a different way of being *oneself*, through dialogue or in contrast with the idea of an *other than oneself*.

In the panorama of the magazines analysed, we found on the one hand highly ethnocentric magazines (associated with phenomena of cultural resistance), on the other magazines attributable to phenomena of cultural creolization and hybridization (ethno-related). Intermediate situations were also found, in correspondence with magazines that represent the outcome of cultural homogenization processes.

We specify that with "ethnocentric" we mean a vision that sees the centrality of one's own experience as opposed to that of others; with "ethnorelative" a position in which one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures (Castiglioni 2005: 14-15).

The main assumption is that the more the experience of cultural difference is open to dialogue and interaction with the other, the more new cultural syntheses and new ways of conceiving the publishing project itself are possible.

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4. Cultural homogenization

India, in relation to its past as a British colony, was, together with many other British colonies, for a long time relegated to occupying a marginal geographical and cultural position with respect to the United Kingdom (Buonanno 2009: 119). Together with other countries, it fell within a melting pot of different cultures defined with a derogatory connotation of *black culture* due to the colour of the skin.

In the last fifty years the term *black* has become an umbrella term aimed at giving a sense of unity, of sharing to cultural practices implemented by young people who were educated and specialized in Great Britain and later returned to their home country. In many cases artists, writers, musicians have initiated a series of cultural practices aimed at overcoming discrimination, but above all at offering a new perception of their own country.

This is the case of the first magazine taken into consideration, «Cocoa & Jasmine», whose name derives from the scents of the cocoa fields of Coonoor and from the jasmine of Madurai. It is an independent annual Indian magazine, established in 2018 within a communication agency (<www.cocoaandjasmine.com>) on the initiative of Sayali Goyal, a young fashion designer trained in London.

The magazine arose from a series of experiences and travel documents by Sayali herself in India and in other countries around the world, with the aim of changing the way people see and experience India, but, at the same time, to create possible connections with other cultures.

Issue 3 of the 2021 magazine (rectangular in size, 210 x 280 mm) is dedicated to Mexico, Morocco and India (one third of the magazine deals with the cultures of foreign countries, while two thirds concern India itself).

The aim is to highlight the similarities between the three countries starting from the symbols found within their material culture (in the fabrics, in the decorations of objects, in the architecture). The contents in text form and the photographs, made largely by Sayali herself, arise from a series of interviews with local artisans or artists; there are also short biographical experiences written by emerging artists.

The general layout of the magazine has a simple structure (a single serif typeface for the entire issue). There are colour photographs (a single illustration) alongside text in one or two columns. Most of the photos reproduce details of objects or fabrics, or architectural elements. Rarely do local

people appear, if any, filmed while they are crafting. The only full frontal figures refer to people interviewed who enjoy a prominent social position. The cover was printed on recycled cotton paper and the magazine has a total number of 128 internal pages (the value of environmental sustainability characterizes the activities of the agency itself).

This magazine, entirely in English, is part of the trend of travel magazines that draw inspiration from cultural anthropology research. The magazine does not yet express a consolidated coordinated image (previous issues are completely different), and appears decidedly anchored to a homogenizing and stereotyped vision of the world that does not fully value cultural differences but rather standardises them.

Although the magazine is aimed at translating textually, and largely photographically, the specificities of India or of countries considered similar, no characteristic features of any country emerge; it is as if it ideally crystallized people, places and local traditions according to a standardized model, through clichés (only beauty, only well-being, only lightness).

In brief, it is as if the pages of the magazine still had that *Englishness* that shapes everything in its own likeness, refusing to show the otherness of the countries represented; in fact, the magazine does not express its own specificity in an incisive way, but conforms in contents and expressive languages to other travel magazines that we find in the West.

5. Resistance and cultural defence

According to Paul Ricoeur (2004) there is no absolute criterion for a good translation:

for such a criterion to be available, it should be possible to compare the source text and the target text with a third text carrying the identical sense that one assumes circulates from the first to the second. The same thing said from one side and the other. [...] Hence the paradox, even before the dilemma: a good translation can only aim at a presumed *equivalence*, not based on a demonstrable *identity* of meaning. [...] This equivalence can only be sought, worked on, presumed. And the only way to criticize a translation – which can always be done – is to propose another, allegedly, claimed to be better or different. (Ricoeur 2004: 40, authors' translation)

«Kajet Journal» represents, in its intent, the third text, a space for cultural renegotiation and rewriting. We are referring to an international magazine in English, created, designed and printed in Bucharest since 2017, thanks to the initiative of Petrică Mogoş and Laura Naum.

Currently four issues have been printed, and since the first issue their intentions have been openly declared: to overturn prejudices, stereotypes and anecdotal representations of Eastern Europe and build new bridges by opening up to others.

The first issue (dimensions 165 x 230 mm), printed in a thousand copies, contains a real manifesto, which is re-proposed on the corresponding website (<https://kajetjournal.com>).

«Kajet» challenges cultural Eurocentrism with a well-designed publication, both in content and form. The first issue contains an introductory letter addressed to readers in which the meaning and objectives of the magazine are specified; following on are 18 essays accompanied by 18 visual projects created by 40 writers and artists, for a total of 240 pages. The layout is based on the book format, divided into five main sections; the editors state that the name of the magazine – *Kajet* – is an orientalized version of the French *Cahier*.

Overall, there is an extreme refinement both in the layout of the texts (in one or two columns) and in the iconographic apparatus, which includes: illustrations, a collage, documentary photos or historical archive photos, with additional contrasting graphic signs (as it appears on the front cover). On the one hand, the magazine recognizes the significant traits and contradictions that characterize Eastern Europe: «A boiling cauldron, a crucible, a constellation in fusion with its own power struggles, a world driven by internal social dynamics tainted by congenital corruption, as well as by stubborn memories that refuse to fade»; but at the same time it claims the right to disseminate its culture in all its components beyond prejudices. Only in these terms is it possible to break down every barrier by supporting a broader vision, open to dialogue and mutual respect.

6. Biculturality

It is now quite a widespread issue to be bicultural, i.e. refer to a local language and at the same time communicate through another language (see the term EFL, English as a Foreign Language), to participate in culture on a global scale (Burke 2008: 97).

There are cases in which the two languages are not on an equal footing, and then we speak of "cultural diglossia" (coexistence of two linguistic codes, one of which is considered inferior to the other). But there are cases in which, following exposure to a second culture beyond that of belonging, two linguistic registers are used equally and in an undifferentiated way, in other words they are recognized as having equal dignity. This is the case of the independent magazine «Safar», designed in 2014 by the Lebanese graphic studio of the same name.

It is a biennial and bilingual magazine, English and Arabic, published in Beirut, dealing with design and visual culture. In fact, the subtitle reads as follows: *flirt with, flee from, and fall for graphic design and visual culture*.

The term *Safar* in Arabic means "journey" and the magazine itself wants to represent a journey around a chosen theme, across disciplinary, cultural and linguistic boundaries. According to the authors, it was designed to remedy the scarcity of critical contributions on design in the global south and to give a voice to designers considered active agents of cultural production. One of the most interesting aspects of this project is the close integration between Lebanese culture and Western culture. This co-presence of two cultures is highlighted by the presence of a double cover, in English on the front (for a progressive reading of the text from left to right), in Arabic on the back (according to a reading that proceeds from right to left starting from the last page).

This co-presence of cultures also characterizes the magazine from a conceptual and political point of view. Since the culture of design was created and codified in the West, the magazine pursues the objective of providing Lebanon with an opportunity for cultural study of the design sphere, with the possibility of creating neologisms or new linguistic interpretations (<www.stackmagazines.com/magazine/safar-issue-5>).

Overall, the magazine has 208 pages, with a rectangular format of 275 x 210 mm.

Its readers are represented by a rich community of designers, architects and researchers, or more simply by people interested in the art and culture of Western Asia and North Africa.

Number five of the magazine, for example, has migration as its central theme; more specifically, the cover story consists of an interview with Tsigereda Brihanu and Mekdes Yilma, two Ethiopian women, activists and

domestic workers, who share their experiences related to "Kafala", the sponsorship system used to exploit many vulnerable migrant workers in Lebanon.

The stories of these women are emphasized in the photographic representation on the double cover: in the foreground, the first woman (Mekdes) wears a doubtful expression on the English front cover, while the second (Tsigereda) smiles on the Arabic back cover.

The inside pages are printed in a combination of colours that recall the double cover: yellow, green, dark pink and white. The text is printed in contrast against the coloured background: green on yellow, photographic pages on a pink background or indefinite colours, green on white for in-depth panels, infographics or line illustrations on a white, pink or grey background to create a rhythm and avoid monotony while the images progress without text.

Full-page photographs are intended to contextualize the interviews or to render the portrait of the interviewer and the interviewee. The text of three short stories takes on different colours on a white background but is flanked by line illustrations in black and white. A succession of images relating to an international exhibition for Palestine skims over a uniform green background with double captions in yellow. The lead article appears at the end of the magazine (English reading progression) or at the beginning of the magazine (Arabic reading progression). Alongside the interview translated into two columns in English and Arabic, a series of full-page photographs appear that represent the subjects and the reference context in a realistic or evocative way.

Despite multiple local difficulties (Beirut is going through a serious economic, political and social crisis), the magazine continues to operate with a view to promoting the confrontation between East and West through a series of online and offline intercultural initiatives.

7. Cultural hybridization

When two cultural universes come into contact, *interculture* is created, which presupposes a dynamic contiguity between two cultures in which interaction and mutual exchange are central («Safar» is a paradigmatic example). A subsequent step, *transculturality* or, in other words, cultural hybridization, is part of a broader perspective that presupposes a common

work between people of different cultures moved by common goals. The result is new cultural syntheses and the consequent emergence of new forms of creative collaboration.

An example of this is the award-winning editorial project «Migrant», which is one of the independent magazines that deal with the phenomenon of migration.

The innovative point of view is that the project, which includes six issues (from 2016 to 2019), arose as a collective initiative within a working group made up of migrants from different geographical areas: a Portuguese living in Norway, a German and an Austrian based in Switzerland, a Frenchman living in London; and later (from number 3) a Spaniard living in London, and a German woman working in Moscow. The project was initially launched on Kickstarter, the goal was to create a paper magazine to be distributed through book stores.

As the founders of the magazine state:

Migrant's issues are incredibly multifaceted in content, with each issue handling one specific theme. The first, Across Country, looks at the countryside as a space of migration; the second, Wired Capital, is about the movement of information, money and human labour; Flowing Grounds moves to the sea and sky as migratory spaces; Dark Matters looks at migration that happens by night, or in illegal or invisible contexts; Micro Odysseys is about movement in small scales, like bacteria or sand; while the final issue, the newly released Foreign Agents, examines the movement of culture. (<www.itsnicethat.com/features/migrant-journal-publication-graphic-design-100619>, accessed 20 August 2021)

Contents and graphic design have been developed in an integrated way, each issue of the magazine is distinguished by two colours which take on a symbolic value in relation to the theme dealt with; we find the two colours on the cover (which in turn has a paper of a different texture), but also within the images and illustrations:

So for us, it was important to have the right paper, especially for the cover. Because we're creating this experience, affecting how people remember things with a special touch or a metallic colour. It's not about being a luxury product, though, but more about conveying the stories in a way that is different from on-

line. (Isabel Seiffert, <www.itsnicethat.com/features/migrant-journal-publication-graphic-design-100619>, accessed 20 August 2021).

All issues of the magazine feature the Migrant Grotesk typeface (designed by Cristoph Miler and Isabel Seiffert) and the Akzidenz Grotesk for service texts.
Note that the Migrant Grotesk font is an evolution of Akzidenz Grotesk, designed to emphasize the idea of migration between countries and continents:

"It is movement that is defined by constant stops and goes", says Christoph. "You move organically through the landscape, following your own path, but then you encounter a checkpoint, a border, a visa office, and your movement comes to an abrupt stop. We wanted to reflect these ambiguous ways of movement within a journey and this is why Migrant Grotesk has smooth curves but also hard edges that contrast in a weird way". (Christoph Miller,<www.itsnicethat.com/features/migrant-journal-publication-graphic-design-100619>, accessed 20 August 2021).

Alongside the chromatically treated illustrations and photographs, we find numerous maps and infographics, visual components that strongly characterize each migration. The front cover flyleaf features a United Nations geoscheme that divides the world's countries into regions and sub-regions, grouped on a statistical basis; this configuration constitutes a sort of summary visual index indicating the countries taken into consideration in the internal articles. The magazine has seen close collaboration between editors and designers, roles that overlap and reinforce each other in terms of content research and the search for sophisticated expressive languages. This can be seen from the close correlation between the multiplicity of contents (the phenomenon of migration underlies different narratives) and the visual translation of the magazine with attention to every detail.
Bringing us back to the theme of otherness, «Migrant» represents an exemplary case of cultural hybridization, where openness to the *other*, in their difference, is confirmed as a resource and an incentive to produce new creative syntheses of value.

8. Conclusions

Starting from a redefinition of communication design as *writing of the other*, both on the structural level of the communication production process and on the level of the designed artefacts, we have placed the accent on four distinct forms of contemporary independent magazines which constitute the outcome of a series of translation processes in the publishing field, but at the same time a synthesis of the forms of self-representation of cultures considered "other" compared to the West.

If, as Di Giovanni and Bollettieri Bosinelli (2009) argue, the West in the past has attempted several times and on several fronts to forge otherness in its own image and resemblance/dissemblance, conditioning the voices of others and adapting them to its own universe of values. Through independent publishing the possibility seems to open up of bringing to light the writings, images and experiences of those who we should by now define the *former others*.

In these terms, editorial translation as *put into the form of content* highlights a series of operational-process steps (the methods of translation and its possible declinations), but also the versatility in terms of cultural, linguistic and ideological options connected to the cultural context of reference, the need for self-representation or the intent to establish new forms of cultural hybridization in the relationship other than oneself.

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The Recognition of the Other through (Iconic) Language
Gender-sensitive Practices and Advice from and for Communication Design

> The point here is that difference, being "other than" or "different from" "Man", is actually negatively perceived as "worth less than" "Man". This epistemic and symbolic exclusion is no abstraction: it translates into ruthless violence for the real-life people who happen to coincide with categories of negative difference.
>
> Rosi Braidotti, *Post-human Feminism*

1. Introduction

The debate centred on gender discriminations and gender power asymmetry has been steadily growing and evolving. However, in 2023, we still have to fight for issues and rights that should be firmly established nowadays. In recent years, misogyny and sexism have gained new strength from the claims of populist and nationalist governments. The "traditional family" concept is celebrated at international conferences, the right to abortion is being questioned and abolished in some states,[1] and right-wing groups in Italy are attacking an imaginary "gender theory" to discredit feminist groups and the LGBTQIA+ community. The list could go on, including episodes of violence that culminate in their most extreme form: there have been thirty nine femicides in Italy in the last six months.[2]

This brief but sufficiently upsetting overview remarks the urgency of this contribution. With this chapter, we aim to contribute to the reflection on

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[1] After 50 years, in 2022 the USA Supreme Court eliminated the constitutional right to abortion. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html>. In Poland, the Constitutional Tribunal rolled back women's right to terminate pregnancies in 2020, ruling that women can undergo an abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or if their life is in danger.

[2] From January to June 2023, the "Non una di meno" National Observatory recorded 39 femicides, five suicides and two deaths – under investigation – induced or suspected to be induced by hetero-cis-patriarchal violence and hatred. See <https://osservatorionazionale.nonunadimeno.net/>.

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the relationship between the (iconic) languages, the recognition of Alterity – from the perspective of gender studies – and the design dimension, by presenting the *Manifesto for a Gender-Sensitive Communication* as a case study.

2. Normality = man vs Alterity = other than man

The quote from Rosi Braidotti, with which we chose to open this contribution, succinctly captures the perspective we adopted in discussing Alterity. According to Braidotti, the "other", understood as a 'deviation from the norm', encompasses everything different or divergent from the dominant male model (white, Western, heterosexual, non-disabled, wealthy man). This is an epistemic and symbolic exclusion that does not end in abstraction; it translates into forms of violence that have tangible impacts on the real-life experiences of individuals who coincide with one or more categories of negative difference. We still live in a strongly androcentric and patriarchal environment, where *patriarchy* is understood as a «deep-rooted "habit of mind" that allowed men's domination of women, as well as the domination of racial minorities by whites, the young by the old, and women by other women, to seem normal» (Delap 2020: 68). It is precisely the concept of *norms* and *normality*, in contrast to *Alterity*, the core of this paper.
In this perspective, the sense of "feminine" can only be understood in relation to the sense of "masculine". It can be traced back to systems and models of representation that establish the terms to comprehend and, above all, organise the (power) relations between men and women, whose differences are, as Demaria stated, «the product of discursive, material and cultural constraints» (Demaria 2019: 24, authors' translation).
Similarly, in her work *Teorie di genere. Femminismi e semiotica*, Demaria referred to gender as a semiotic device that individuals assume as a component of their own identity, drawing upon the expression "en-gendering". The en-gendering of individuals occurs when they «adhere to the meaning effects produced by gender representations, or rather by the "gender technologies", to use the term that Teresa de Lauretis assigned to those *power devices* [...] within which gender models are produced and consumed» (Demaria 2019: 43, authors' translation).
Among these power technologies are the media and communication artefacts. It is well-established that images constitute the matrix of the imaginary, recognition/misrecognition and identification, thus articulating the

self, the subjectivity (Mulvey 1975), and how subjectivity relates to collectivity. If it is true that language – from the disciplinary perspective of communication design, also and primarily understood as iconic language – is the means through which human beings represent reality, it also contributes to either consolidating it as it is or, conversely, modifying it (MIUR 2018; Robustelli 2000), generating vicious (or virtuous) circles.

Language conveys cultural categories of the community in which it is developed and serves as a medium for constructing concepts and power relationships. Through language, understood as a symbolic system, gender identity is constructed: language is the *cause* of the subject. The symbolic order, which is also a social and cultural order, structures each individual's conscious and unconscious subjectivity. It expresses the thought and affects it, contributing to the determination of reality: without specific words, certain realities cannot be affirmed, and consequently, they are not recognised as such (Robustelli 2000). The definition of female presence in society passes through language. If the rule of *male-as-norm*,[3] a remnant of a culture based on androcentrism, prevails in iconic and verbal language, this results in the denial of Alterity (Bucchetti 2021). In the same direction the thought of Derrida becomes crucial as it indicates how the definition of female identity is based on an exclusion that is first and foremost carried out in and through language. The opposition between masculine and feminine is sustained by establishing a hierarchical value system: the feminine is subordinate to the masculine into which it converges, and the marked term functions as an "accident".

3. How to act through communication design?
What is designed without proper awareness can implicitly reproduce power dynamics that are not truly inclusive and equal, and the resulting biased design output and the effect of meaning it produces can have the power to exclude a particular social group (Levick-Parkin 2017). In this framework,

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[3]   Androcentrism corresponds to a principle of separation that points to the division of masculine and feminine as opposed principles, to which the hierarchy is related that considers the masculine as the norm of the world, as opposed to the feminine, which is determined as a deviation from the norm. This has led to designate the phenomenon with the terms "male as norm" or "male as default", even going so far as to speak of "false neutrality" when what is only man's is claimed to be universal (Sabatini 1987).

every design choice implemented by a designer becomes a political act, implying a choice regarding inclusion and exclusion. It involves an important decision: who should/can be represented and whom one decides – more or less consciously – to represent (and in relation to whom/what). Designing, therefore, requires recognizing one's own responsibilities and developing full awareness of what is conveyed through the designed artefacts and the impact they can have on the sociocultural context.

If design culture is one of the social practices in which the representation of ways of thinking and acting, mental constructs and systems of ideas take shape, which actions and tools can we develop – as designers and researchers – to promote an approach to communication design (and beyond) that gives spaces and voices to Alterity, deviating from the dominant model that equates masculinity with the norm?

With the *Manifesto for a gender-sensitive communication*, we intend not only to declare a specific position but also to take on the responsibility of involving other communication designers in order to spread a series of strategies and points of attention to circumvent/avoid falling into what we have defined as the "dominant model" – «where frontal attack fails, contamination prevails».[4]

The Manifesto project is a natural consequence of years of work and research by the dcxcg group[5] of the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, in the field of communication design and gender cultures. With this project we have translated in the format of a manifesto a *credo* and a statement, followed by the "10 principles for gender-sensitive communication". These principles were developed and translated through systematisation and synthesis of evidence emerging from observations of different areas of the media landscape from 2012 to the present. Therefore, the *Manifesto for a Gender-Sensitive Communication* is a meeting point between theoretical study, research and practical activity. It serves as a tool for

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[4] Alessandro Baricco, *Quel che stavamo cercando. 33 frammenti*, 2021, Feltrinelli.

[5] The dcxcg group deals with research projects and teaching to foster the social responsibility of Communication Design in the context of Gender Cultures. It intends to help developing critical knowledge and, at a pragmatic level, designing actions of awareness-raising, information and education for the visual construction of society, contributing to the development of communication design projects for a re-thinking of formats and rules of communication. See: <http://www.dcxcg.org/eng/>.

self-reflection and guidance in daily practice, and it also proposes some points of attention, which we could define as "strategies" to bypass stereotypes and "transform" the effect of representations. These strategies are underpinned not only by a linguistic and critical project but also by an ethical and political one through which the social action is expressed.

3.1 The Rationale Behind the Manifesto

A manifesto is the affirmation of an idea, a vision that challenges the present and the *status quo*. It arises from an urgent need for change, exposing the limits and weaknesses of the current reality and calling for awareness and collective action. «Not as a war cry for an avant-garde to move even further and faster ahead, but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to stop going further in the same way as before toward the future» (Latour 2010: 473). Drafting a manifesto induces the authors to clarify intentions and contents and identify the necessary and most suitable words to convey the message concisely, immediately and convincingly. Moreover, the manifesto format allows for and requires an assertive tone, distancing the cautious and more complacent ones typically found in scientific dissemination. This assertive approach reflects a firm and decisive stance, stimulating critical reflection even through conflict. In academic settings, writing a manifesto entails more than recognizing the urgency of an issue; it involves taking a position and declaring it, introducing a tool designed to generate dialogue, confrontation and reflection. As Olivia Lucca Fraser, one of the members of Laboria Cubonik, the group that drafted *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, stated, «the whole point of writing something like [a manifesto] is to try to reshape the discursive chessboard, at least in some small but structural way, and not just to move the existing pieces around» (2016).

Through the Manifesto for a Gender-Sensitive Communication, the editors have explicitly stated their position regarding issues related to the (under-, mis-) representation of women in communicative artefacts, addressing their community – and the broader community of designers and communication experts – to invite them to recognise the urgency and take responsibility for their role as active participants in using and promoting a gender-sensitive approach to design and beyond. The project is driven by the desire to effect change and act upon it from the disciplinary perspective of communication design.

4. The Manifesto for a gender-sensitive communication

The Manifesto, which takes the form of a website,[6] primarily consists of three sections. Following the tradition of previous manifestos, it begins with a statement that declares "who we are", how we identify ourselves and the community we belong to. This self-definition is crucial for immediate recognition and identification by the audience. The opening statement reads: «We are a group of university professors, academics, researchers and students». The connection to communication design is explicitly stated in the title and the declaration's subsequent text.

After the "who we are" section, the Manifesto continues with a declaration articulating and formalizing a clear standpoint. The declaration is composed by the following:

1. The *credo* – «we believe that communication is a tool for inclusion and a space to build creative forms of resistance» – that reaffirms the role of communication as a fundamental actor in driving processes of social innovation.

2. An appeal – «we demand advocacy against gender inequalities, gender roles, stereotyping of identities; the abolition of gender-based hierarchies; respect for personal choices» – that concisely expresses the macro-issues that, when manifested in communicative artefacts, are amplified and consolidated. These issues revolve around the non-recognition, non-respect and denial of alterity, against which a firm stance is called for.

3. The explicit declaration of commitment and assumption of responsibility – «we are committed to inclusive and diversity-friendly visual and verbal language, embracing the ten principles of gender-sensitive communication». – This last passage of the declaration refers to the second part of the Manifesto: the ten principles for gender-sensitive communication and the commitment to integrate them into daily practice.

The first part constitutes a clear statement. However, the strength of this Manifesto lies in its programmatic role, that is, its ability to extract, rework and reorganise main concepts that have emerged from theoretical and

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[6]   See: <https://www.comunicazionegendersensitive.polimi.it/en/home-2/>.

practical reflection. These concepts are transformed into principles – ten indispensable requirements that communication must meet to be "gender-sensitive", which form the second part of the Manifesto in sequential order – and into practical suggestions and points of attention. These serve to guide daily actions and steer communicative projects towards greater "sustainability", understood from a sociocultural point of view.

These two parts, the principles and the points of attention, are closely interconnected and result from a multilayered translation process. Initially, we mapped and clustered the semantic and morphological asymmetries in images that convey gender asymmetries. Then, we simultaneously undertook two operations: on the one hand, we translated the identified clusters into points of attention/advice for selecting or constructing gender-sensitive images, and on the other hand, we conducted a reverse operation – from the particular to the general – to draft the ten principles.

4.1 The 10 Principles for a gender-sensitive communication
The ten principles should be understood as fundamental and indispensable requirements that a gender-sensitive iconic and verbal language should meet. These principles revolve around ten key terms, each providing a concise explanation, highlighting the attributed meaning and the adopted perspective.

1. Equal, ensuring fair representation and visibility for individuals;
2. Inclusive, addressing everyone indiscriminately, countering the "male-as-default" norm;
3. Respectful, taking into account the diversity of identities, choices and personal orientations;
4. Fair, recognizing roles, skills, titles and merits without any distinction;
5. Anti-stereotypical, abolishing stereotypes, expressions and clichés rooted in an asymmetrical and androcentric worldview;
6. A-hierarchical, rejecting forms that underlie implicit gender-based hierarchies;
7. Non-binary, enhancing plurality and uniqueness as opposed to male/female polarisation;
8. Intersectional, considering different social identities and forms of discrimination;

9. Unconventional, finding solutions that break with gender-based conventions;
10. Aware, recognizing and anticipating the impact of a message on individuals and society.

4.2 Tips and Advice

As previously mentioned, the Manifesto's third part serves as the project's operational complement. This section translates the declared values and principles into tips and advice for implementing gender-sensitive visual and verbal language in everyday communication practices.

The recommendations presented in this section are intended as monitoring strategies to assess the appropriateness of the languages used. They aim to initiate a process of self-reflection among communication designers, hoping that they will become automatisms to be put into practice every time there is a need to communicate, addressing the community, using verbal or iconic language.

These guidelines are designed to serve various contexts, ranging from academic to professional settings. They aim to raise awareness and evaluate the gender-sensitivity of institutional documents, formulae and materials intended for students (e.g., slides), as well as the design of artefacts and the modes and language employed when engaging with students, colleagues, and clients. Those proposed are strategies aimed at challenging the *inertia of thought* (Criado Perez 2019), hindering the Proliferation of the Equal (Han 2016) and the crystallisation of rigid models. The objective is to open up possibilities for plural representations of reality able to reflect its characteristics of multiplicity and heterogeneity through iconic and verbal language.

Regarding verbal language, the suggestions were developed based on the analysis of institutional documents, such as the *Guidelines for the Use of Administrative Language* (2018) promoted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). The points of attention for iconic language derive from summarizing and translating the evidence that emerged from research activities conducted over the years on visual texts. These activities allowed for the identification and understanding of the various ways in which images can reinforce the invisibility and discrimination of women. «With every design choice we make, there is the potential to not just exclude but to oppress» (Khandwala 2019).

We have adopted the perspective of communication design, which makes reflecting on iconic language the central axis of the Manifesto as well as the aspect we aim to bring to attention to drive change and act upon change from this specific disciplinary background.

Giving voice to the Other

The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it. The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded. (Bourdieu 1998: 9)

The invisibility of the feminine is a phenomenon shared by both verbal (referring to the Italian language) and iconic language, often justified by the alleged neutrality of expressions and representations that are, actually, expressions of the masculine. Selecting an image exclusively representing male subjects to represent a whole heterogeneous community does not imply neutrality but rather a male-oriented representation, effectively excluding the feminine from the discourse (Bucchetti 2022).
To counteract the use of the masculine as an inclusive norm, as a presumed neutral representation – *man-as-default* or *male as norm* – and to allow the affirmation of the feminine as a subject, it is necessary first to acknowledge and explicitly recognise the presence of women through language. It is therefore crucial to "avoid the use of the man-as-default" ensuring, for example, not to use images depicting only male subjects when the message is neutral or when addressing all genders indiscriminately. Furthermore, in all the cases where a community or a group of subjects is represented, it is essential to "ensure fair representation" by verifying that women and men are equally represented in the selection of images, guaranteeing quantitative representativeness of both female and male subjects.

Representing the Other
Equitable representation from a numerical perspective needs to be complemented by a qualitative consideration, taking into account the type of images selected, the modes and contexts of their use and their relation

with textual elements. It is essential to question the relevance of an image to its context: How does the image relate to the surrounding context? What does it contribute? Why was it chosen? "Verify the relevance of the images to their context" is a crucial step to avoid discriminatory representations that relegate female subjects to decorative and attractive roles: a phenomenon that is widespread to the extent that the term "*grechina*" – for which there is no male equivalent – has been coined in the Italian context, referring to cases where female images are used solely for decorative purposes, without any meaningful connection to the textual content or the context in which they are placed.

Empowering the Other

When considering representations that involve male and female figures, there is often a tendency to fall into hierarchical representations that (not always consciously) subordinate women to men. This observation applies not only to pictogrammatic systems but also to any area of visual communication (Bucchetti and Casnati 2019; Di Turi 2022). Based on these observations and reflections, an attention point concerning visual hierarchies was formulated, urging attention regarding «hierarchical relationships and those parameters that lead the beneficiary of the message to perceive, to varying degrees of consciousness, a subordinate relationship of women to men» (Bucchetti and Casnati 2019: 166).

This point, formulated in a proactive manner, invites to «foster forms of representation that do not imply gender-based hierarchies», considering the relationships among the represented subjects in terms of quantity, space, dimensions and the type of action performed (Bucchetti and Casnati 2019). In depictions of groups, for example, one should ensure an equal number of female and male subjects (quantitative balance), avoid placing female subjects consistently in the background or behind male subjects (spatial relationship), prevent the depiction of female subjects being unjustifiably smaller than male subjects, especially when using pictographic figures (dimensional ratios), and avoid an imbalance of passive/active behaviours based on gender. A more equitable portrayal of women and men also involves a "non-discriminatory representation of roles". This point aims to draw attention to the issue of gender roles, promoting diversity by selecting images depicting women and men in unconvention-

al roles and professions so as not to feed clichés, making sure to include, when possible, representations of women in top positions.

Unveiling the plurality
Conceiving feminine and masculine as two dichotomous concepts defined by contrast and difference (Zingale 2012) inevitably leads to constructing binary and polarised representation models that erase their complexity, nuances and ambiguities.

The Alterity, however, underlies a broader and evolving concept. Each individual can be simultaneously considered both Identity and Alterity in relation to oneself and what is different from oneself. It is, therefore, unthinkable to reduce such complexity to a finite and limited number of representation models without resulting in a highly partial, distorted and often discriminatory depiction of reality. Hence, it is crucial to constantly engage, through design action, in reflecting the complexity of reality and reaffirming the value, importance and beauty of Alterity. A designer should each time strive to propose different subjects and imagery, rejecting and opposing the rigidity of overused and abused representation models and forms.
How does this translate into practical terms? In formulating the latest points of attention, the focus was on translating and providing suggestions to encourage experimentation with alternative representative models, moving away from representational clichés within which each designer finds themselves in a "comfort zone". The difficulty in this stage lies in maintaining a balance between the need to offer sufficiently precise, clear and specific advice without being overly prescriptive in the instructions. In practice, it is therefore suggested to prefer images featuring subjects with heterogeneous physicality and traits to avoid disseminating standardised and idealised images of women and men and to "avoid reinforcing dominant aesthetic ideals". Additionally, to "avoid depicting women and men in ways that reinforce their status quo", when selecting or creating an image, it is suggested to consider the characterizing elements such as posture, expressions, gestures, attitudes and clothing as potential vectors of sexist social models, and take on the challenge of transforming their meaning and utilizing them positively to convey values of fairness and inclusion.

Fostering and representing plurality also involves chromatic choices and symbolic representation. It is recommended to "promote the use of heterogeneous and non-stereotypical colour palettes", choosing colour palettes that do not adhere to the traditional gender associations of pink for females and blue for males. Where it is necessary to distinguish or designate genders using colours, better opting for palettes that break away from the conventional pink/blue codes. Besides, when using symbolic depictions with reference to gender, "opt for images that move away from visual clichés", avoiding stereotypical associations, such as using lipstick or high-heeled shoes to designate females or a tie for males.

These points of attention aim to provide concrete support for taking a stance, with the hope that they can be internalised to the extent of becoming almost automatic, prompting the right question at the right time in every design path, thus avoiding the trap of stereotypes. The Manifesto and its points of attention appeal to the social responsibility of designers and all those involved in the field of communication design. They provide practical tools that can be effectively integrated into daily practices and translate into a tangible commitment to promoting forms of representation that go beyond the deeply rooted sexist remnants in visual and verbal language. This is achieved through an inclusive, gender-sensitive and equal language that embraces Alterity as its expressive form.

5. Conclusions

Addressing Alterity from the perspective of representation through language, especially iconic language, by drafting a manifesto of intentions and programmatic points of attention posed a significant challenge. The main difficulty faced was to find a way to tackle an extraordinarily complex and current theme, one that is still wide open to debate and reflection, while successfully summarizing the crucial issues without generalizing or trivializing the subject matter and effectively conveying it through the distinctive assertive tone and concise writing that characterise the manifesto format. This particular style represents the tool's principal value and its main criticality. Summarizing, by definition, implies making choices and deciding what to include and exclude from the perspective taken. It implies losing specific nuances of meaning, as it requires to adopt a very clear perspective to favour the immediacy and effectiveness of communication.

Another crucial and critical aspect was the formulation of the points of attention, particularly in terms of tone, specificity and prescriptiveness of the guidelines, to maintain individual discretion without losing sight of the Manifesto's objectives. These needs led to focusing the Gender-Sensitive Communication Manifesto's stance and operational principles on the non-representation/under-representation/misrepresentation of women in communicative artefacts. As authors, we acknowledge that this perspective provides only a partial understanding of the Other and its representation. Indeed, to foster equitable representation from an intersectional standpoint, it is essential to consider and integrate multiple viewpoints in the reflection. Starting with the gender category, transcending the male/female dichotomy to include all kinds of identity expression, and then expanding the reflection to include the depiction of ethnicities, ages, disabilities, aesthetic canons and social conditions.

Despite its limitations and criticalities, the Manifesto remains a valuable tool for expressing and sharing a critical stance. It is more than a final and definitive outcome as it is rather a starting point to encourage reflection and dialogue, inspire critical thinking and push boundaries. Therefore, the Manifesto may and should serve as a platform for reflection, engaging diverse professionals and experiences in a collaborative and mutually enriching perspective. The 2020 re-edition of the *First Things First Manifesto* is an interesting example of this concept. The fact that its content is openly accessible and editable online encourages designers and subscribers not only to endorse it but also to be active and intervene to modify it, thus enriching the reflection and integrating new forms of awareness derived from their professional practice.

In addition to fostering collaboration and the integration of expertise in different fields, it is crucial to shift the focus from what it is to what it could become to nurture the project's growth. This includes exploring different formats that would facilitate broader dissemination and easier sharing, and considering tools that could be developed to enhance its practical application, for example, a checklist of gender-sensitive parameters for evaluating a communication artefact. However, the potential evolutions of the Manifesto remain an open question, serving as a stimulus for ongoing and future reflections.

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Data, Algorithms and Otherness
The Erasure of the Other

1. Introduction: algorithms, data, bias and otherness

Imagine we query a search engine for two sentences and compare the results: "unprofessional hairstyles for work" and "professional hairstyles for work" (fig. 1). We will find a grid composed of images of black women with natural hair on one side and, on the other, a catalogue of photos of white, coiffed women (Alexander 2016). Now imagine to use a tool to automatically translate sentences from a language that has no gender pronouns into one that does have them: the algorithm performing the translation will assign the masculine pronoun to sentences that refer to actions such as "driving a car" and "trading", while it will use the feminine pronoun to translate sentences that describe actions such as "taking care of children" or "dancing" (fig. 2). These two examples outline the perimeter within which this paper moves: if we understand as "other" what is alien to predominant tenets and identity structures, what are the effects of increasingly delegating decisions and interpretive acts to automatic and computational processes? What is the contribution that designers may give in this scenario?

In this contribution, we reflect on the critical issues related to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning algorithms. We focus on their connection to data, and we introduce some concepts that describe data as artefacts influenced by the biases, sensitivities, and interpretations of those who produce and use these data, as opposed to the positivist and technocentric conception that sees data as a neutral and objective tool for analysing social and cultural phenomena. Next, we highlight the relation between Machine Learning (ML) and data, and we present some strategies that are useful to narrate the acts of non-inclusion embedded in the operation of algorithms. While reviewing these strategies, we compare two complementary approaches. On the one hand, we illustrate a series of systematic *in-vitro* approaches that aim to reconstruct and understand the
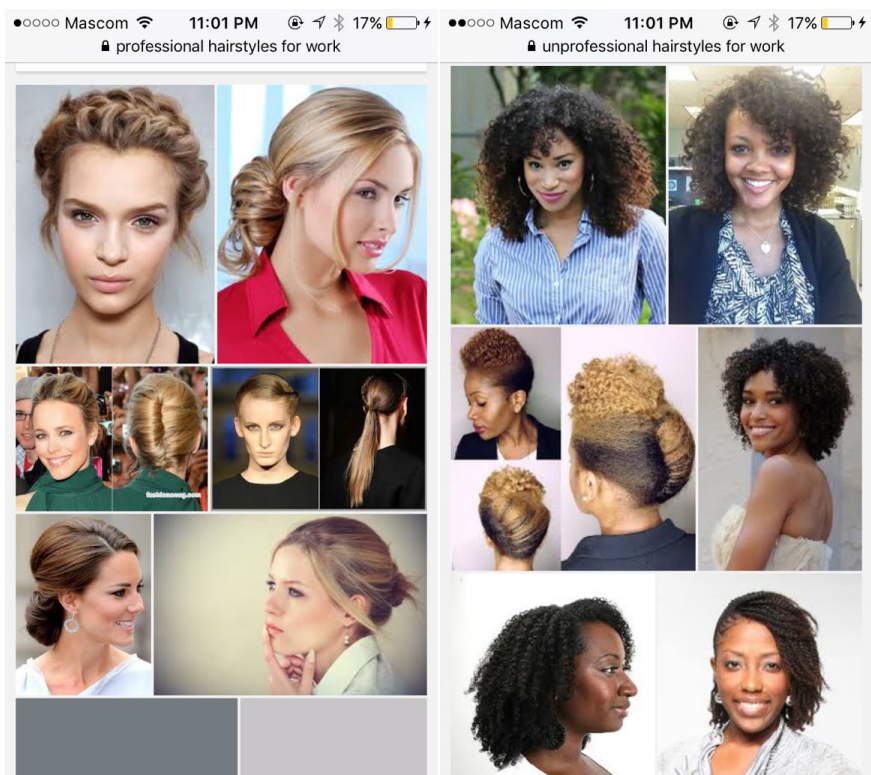
Figure 1. Screenshot of Google Image search engine. Image search results for "non-professional hair for work" (right) and "professional hair for work" (left) on Google. Source: <https://archive.ph/G0yz2>, online on 31 December 2023.

often opaque processes governing the operation of various algorithms. On the other hand, we give an account of experiences that map the effects of these technologies *in-the-field*. These examples seek to collect anomalies in the operation of algorithms in everyday life, trying to find out what escapes algorithmic classification systems. These latter works, which we may call *catalogues of errors*, constitute a stepping stone to the exploration of algorithmic otherness and to the realisation of more inclusive technologies.

2. Critical views on data

Data are of different natures, and we can generally distinguish them into quantitative and qualitative data. Our discussion herein exclusively deals with the former, which are related to the application of statistical and
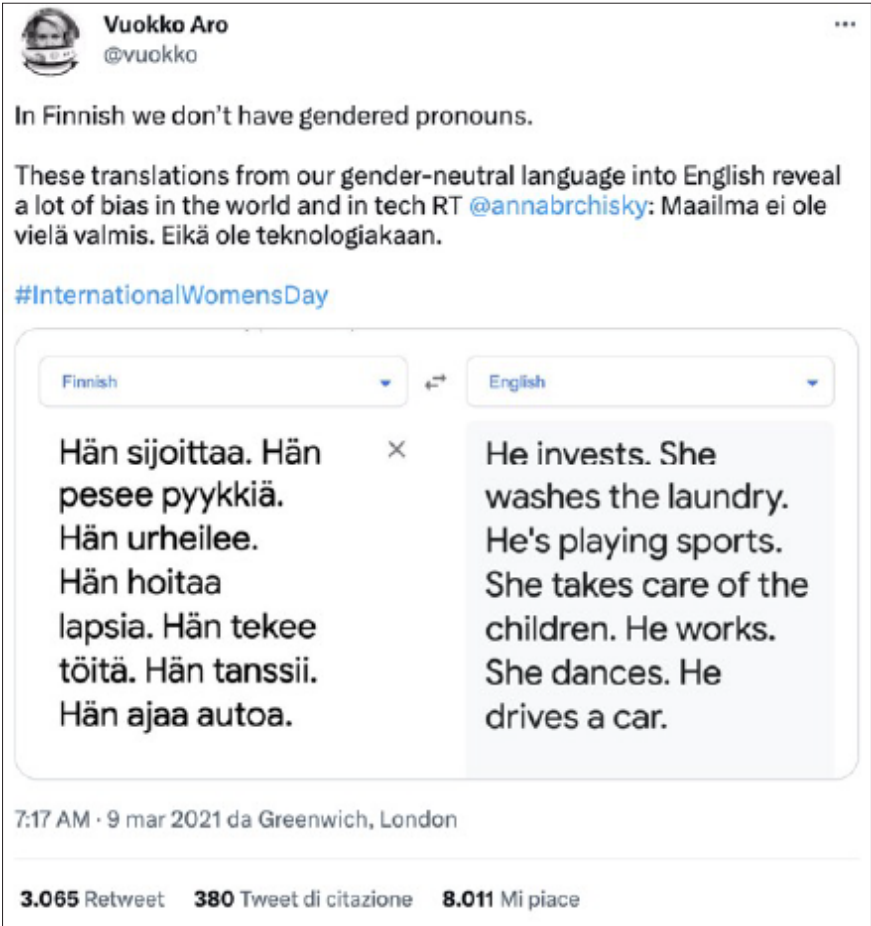
Figure 2. Screenshot of the Google Translate application. Automatic translation of a series of sentences from Finnish to English. <https://archive.ph/DzQtB>, online on 31 December 2023.

computational methods and support the creation of Artificial Intelligence. The following reflections help to understand the cultural context in which the different strategies for inspecting and criticizing the work of algorithms are situated.

Some IBM advertisements claimed the ability to use data to make accurate predictions about the future (Gitelman 2013). The Wikileaks organisation speaks of the data it receives and releases in terms of «evidence of the truth» (Manchia 2020). The narrative that describes data as transparent

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and overt entities («The fundamental stuff of truth itself», Gitelman 2013), which is dominant in certain contexts, is opposed by a view according to which data are artefacts strongly influenced by the social, historical, and political environment in which they are produced (Kitchin 2014). It is a common belief that data are collected, entered, compiled, stored, processed, extracted, visualised, and only then, at the end, also interpreted. Interpretation is often thought of as a final step in the process of data transformation and use, but, actually, every aspect of working with data can be said to be an interpretive act (Gitelman 2013). Data must be generated, and consequently they conceal arbitrary choices and preserve a distance from the phenomenon they represent. Drucker (2011) provided a good summary of this thinking and introduced the term *capta*, as opposed to *data*: «capta is "taken" actively while data is assumed to be a "given" able to be recorded and observed». We collect data to create models[1] of the world in response to specific needs and following certain patterns of interpretation that inevitably lead us to select some specific aspects of the phenomenon under study (Drucker 2020).

The aura of objectivity that is often associated with data appears in visualisation practices following well-defined strategies: using two-dimensional viewpoints, clean layouts, geometric figures, and the inclusion of data sources (Kennedy 2016). There is, however, a discourse that positions data visualisations as situated artefacts, created in a specific historical, political, and social context, and that necessarily integrate and repurpose the point of view of those who build them (Kirk 2016), in a way similar to what according to Haraway (1988) also occurs for knowledge, which also and necessarily has a situated nature.

Even in the field of Digital Humanities, following lengthy reflections on distant reading[2] (Moretti 2000), a reflection has emerged that highlights how the application of computers in literary studies is probably limited to the

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[1]   As McCarty explained, models are tools supporting knowledge and created with a specific purpose: «To an observer B, an object A* is a model of an object A to the extent that B can use A* to answer questions that interest him about A». Models neglect several aspects of the world, especially when they are created to support computational processes. In these cases it is necessary to remove all forms of ambiguity, since computational processes accept only what can be expressed in explicit forms (McCarty 2004).

[2]   Distant Reading employs the usage of computers in literary research. It was introduced by Franco Moretti and can be described as the ability to massively analyse large quantities of literary texts.

analysis of surface features. Indeed, the data derived from these practices are unable to return many of those aspects that are essential for the study of literature, including aspects related to the subtext and ambiguity-bearing elements necessary to set in motion the human work of interpretation and attribution of meaning (Rommel 2004; Marche 2012). To do this, scholars rely on traditional close reading practices (Hayles 2012), precisely because data are not capable to account for the complexity of a literary text.

Although reflections on the subjective, situated, and interpretive dimensions of data are rapidly expanding in a number of research fields, data continue to be subject to a process of *naturalization*: they tend to be regarded as neutral objects not to be questioned as the traces of their histories and contexts of creation have been lost (Denton et al. 2021). This approach becomes particularly problematic as we draw attention to the role of data as instruments of power, capable of perpetrating imbalance and discrimination. The collection and use of data is burdensome in terms of financial and intellectual resources; therefore the groups and minorities who fail to represent themselves through data are subject to control from those who have the ability to create these representations (D'Ignazio and Klein 2016, 2020).

3. Data, algorithms and training sets

The last decade has seen the return of something that calls us on to re-think about the role of data in representing reality: the Artificial Intelligence algorithm and, in particular, Machine Learning. Although the first Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning systems were conceived as early as after World War II (Russel and Norvig 1995: 2), they have recently become part of technologies we use in everyday life such as automatic translators, image recognition systems, and streaming platforms (O' Neil 2016).[3] With an ever-increasing availability of data, and increasing efficiency of computational tools, it has been possible to design tools capable of performing a variety of functions, from the most analytical such as value prediction and classifications, to the most playful ones such as editing images automatically.[4] Plat-

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[3]   Besides, most recent generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and MidJourney, must be considered.

[4]   Moreover, generative AI tools such as MidJourney, Stable Diffusion and Dall-E allows for generating images from scratch starting from textual or visual prompts.
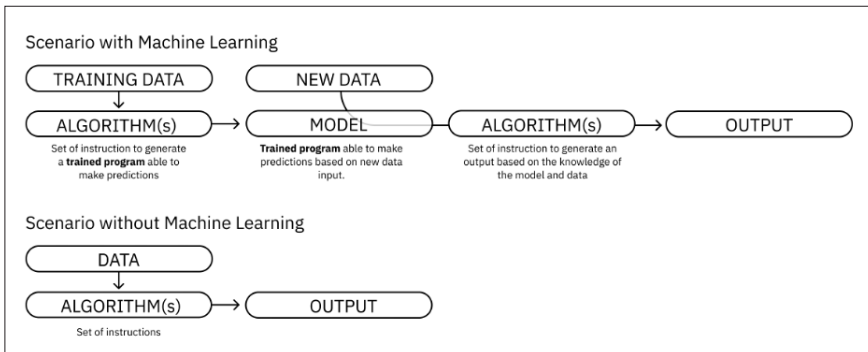
Figure 3. Summary diagram showing the relation between the components of a Machine Learning system compared with a non-ML system. Source: authors.

forms such as Facebook[5] and Instagram[6] use algorithms to profile their users. Similarly, search engines leverage these algorithms to organise their proposed results. Video streaming services such as Netflix[7] and Amazon Prime[8] profile users and, through recommendation algorithms, show them content in line with their interests. Technologies such as facial recognition, used for instance in the unlocking of smartphones, can recognise the content of images and leverage classification principles to identify subjects and objects. In addition, AI and ML algorithms are exploited for prediction purposes in financial or urban security contexts (O'Neil 2016; Diakopulos 2013). These functions are not mutually exclusive but often overlap with each other and different algorithms are used synergistically. For example, a streaming service such as Netflix profiles the user and recommends content. Similarly, an insurance service can predict the user's financial situation only after profiling the user.

Machine Learning is a specific form of AI (Russel and Norvig 1995: 2) that allows computational systems to learn notions without explicit programming. In this context, the ML algorithm is the entity responsible for creating a model through a process of training (fig. 3).

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[5]   <https://www.facebook.com/>.
[6]   <https://www.instagram.com/>.
[7]   <https://www.netflix.com/browse>.
[8]   <https://www.primevideo.com/>.

During this process, large amounts of data, known as *training datasets*, are provided to the algorithm for it to learn notions that are stored into a model, which is later used to perform new actions independently from its creator. For instance, a Machine Learning model aimed at classifying pictures of dogs and cats will be trained with training datasets containing pictures of dogs and cats associated with their common name "dog" or "cat". During the training process, the model learns to identify differences and similarities between the entities, and once the training is over, it will be able to classify new pictures of dogs and cats that are not associated with their common name. Within this particular context, data have paramount significance as they are the fundamental source for developing models. Notably, web-based, manually annotated lists of datasets are accessible and are employed in the training of Machine Learning models. In this regard, some thought needs to be given to the nature of training sets. First, the process of labelling images is manual, carried out by humans with time-consuming processes (e.g., «~1,250,000 images annotated by hand»[9]), and is subject to the biases of those who manually label the images. The term bias comes from the field of cognitive science and represents a form of misinterpretation caused by prejudice (Friedman and Nissenbaum 1996) which may be embedded in the act of labelling images. On the other hand, given the amount of resources required to generate a labelled dataset, it is common for the same dataset to be used on multiple occasions, which causes stagnation of biases and inaccuracies in models (Koch et al. 2021). For example, imagine that people tasked with manually annotating thousands of photographs of animals have only seen dogs and lions in their lifetime: most likely, images of cats will be labelled as lions and the model might learn to classify as a lion what is actually known as a cat.

The type of training that makes the most use of this type of dataset is "supervised training", where the algorithm "teaches" the model to recognise notions included in a dataset labelled a priori. The algorithm exploits the logics chosen by its designers to recognise certain properties of the data it has to process; these logics determine the features that the algorithm will auton-

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[9] <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_datasets_for_machine-learning_research&oldid=1192517147>, online on 31 December 2023.
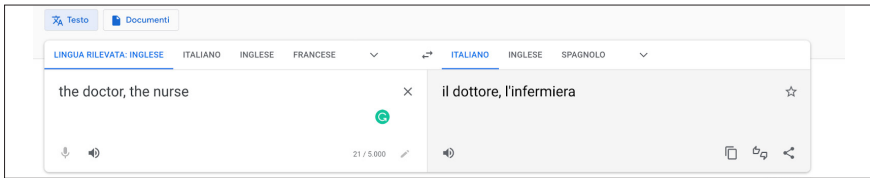
Figure 4. Screenshot of the Google Translate application. Automatic translation of two neutral terms in English that are given a gender in the Italian translation. Retrieved on 20/02/2023. Source: <https://archive.ph/HXgvx>, online on 31 December 2023.

omously consider as relevant.[10] Once the training is finished, the validation phase is carried out, in which a new dataset (or a non-labelled portion of the training dataset) is used to validate the model. During this process, biases may emerge from inappropriate labelling or category disparity. For example, if the training dataset does not have a balanced proportion of cat and dog images, the model will likely need more images to fully learn all the properties of either category. Such strategies to validate, diagnose, and improve models require technical computer skills that are not always accessible.

However, bias and prejudice may also emerge serendipitously during the use of systems that make use of ML algorithms. For example, why do well-known English-Italian automatic translators translate "the doctor" with the masculine determinative article and "the nurse" as feminine? Figure 4 shows the bias built into Google Translate, but the same can also be observed in products from other companies, such as DeepL.[11] Probably, the training dataset that was used to train the algorithm contains the issues and unbalances that are observable in society and included more examples of male doctors and female nurses, although female doctors and male nurses also exist.

The glossary of terms and practices illustrated so far helps to outline the close relation between the operation of algorithms and the vast amounts of data that are used for their "training". Thus, a landscape emerges where the intertwining of machines, human input, and big data generates and perpetuates discriminations that can influence the effects algorithms have in various areas of our daily lives.

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[10]   The various methods used for training include "unsupervised", "semi-supervised", and "reinforced" methods which do not require integrally labelled datasets (Russel and Norvig 1995: 2).

[11]   <https://www.deepl.com/>.

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4. Tracing the operation of algorithmic machines

How can the biases and discriminations of classification systems that underlie ML algorithms, which are often opaque and private (Rudin 2018), be made visible? How is it possible to "trace" (DiSalvo 2009) and make evident the working of these algorithmic machines, to which our society increasingly delegate important decisions? First, the need emerges of a clear disclosure of the rules governing the algorithmic processes of classification and prioritization, namely the need to understand what is included and what comes first and what later. The term *disclosure* (Introna and Nissenbaum 2000) refers to the demand for full and complete exposure of how algorithms work. However, this demand faces a number of obstacles. First, the opacity and inaccessibility of these algorithms is particularly lucrative for companies, it is part of their business strategy and sometimes it is necessary to prevent cyber attacks (Rudin 2018; O' Neil 2016). Second, fully understanding how complex algorithms work requires technical knowledge, which the ordinary user often lacks. Finally, simply disclosing the rules governing an algorithm does not resolve issues related to its unintended discriminatory effects.

5. In vitro approaches: reverse engineering and algorithmic auditing

In response to the limitations of the (often unexpected) demand for disclosure of algorithms' operation rules, we observe a number of approaches aimed at empirically testing the operation and effects of these technologies. These strategies originated in computer science and then quickly spread to other fields and aim to look inside the black boxes of algorithms through controlled experiments. In this section, we report on some of these strategies through some better-known examples.

Reverse engineering (RE) (Diakopulos 2013) is a widely recognised strategy that aims to scrutinise a machine's components and functions across multiple levels of complexity by simulating a validation process.[12] In the context of ML algorithms, RE leverages the only available access points for researchers, which are inputs and outputs. In the supervised ML paradigm, the inputs consist of unlabelled raw data or images to be edited, while the output is the model's learned response, such as newly labelled data or mod-

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[12] <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/reverse-engineering_(Neologismi)/>, online on 31 December 2023.

ified images. By undertaking a systematic process of observation, documentation, and comparison of multiple sessions, RE can effectively reveal any instances of bias and discrimination. Although reverse engineering is a technique used in many fields, when applied to the study of algorithms, it can allow for a better understanding of the relation between input and output that, in some cases, allows for the understanding and copying of private models (Tremer et al. 2016).[13] Figure 2 offers a good example RE applied to AI algorithms by showing how a systematic inquiry conducted on specific inputs (i.e., translations of the same ungendered pronoun) shed light on the biases embedded in the algorithms that process the translation (i.e., the gender biases related to professions).

Another approach is *algorithmic auditing* (Sandvig et al. 2014), which draws from the tradition of independent evaluations performed by external bodies to assess the quality of products and services, or the financial soundness of companies and organisations. The auditing of an algorithm consists in a massive and systematic evaluation of its performance by inputting data and analysing the results while exploiting the participation of multiple users. An empirical audit could entail adopting a "sock puppet" approach wherein auditors fabricate simulated users[14] and input specific classifications of harmful, harmless, or ambiguous content to evaluate the system's outputs and ascertain their alignment with the expected compliance standards.

When multiple human users are involved who are asked to perform the same actions, it is called *collaborative auditing* (Sandvig et al. 2014: 14-15). The sole difference between a sock puppet audit and a collaborative audit is that in the latter, the tester is a human being.

A particular form of collaborative auditing is *crowdsourcing auditing* in which groups of researchers involve users willing to collaborate through a public call (Sanna et al. 2021); the goal, again, is to analyse malfunctions, which may reveal discrimination or exclusionary phenomena. This technique has proven particularly effective in observing the learning levels of different image recognition systems. One example was the "Gender Shades" project (fig. 5), which analysed and compared the performance of different face rec-

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[13]   As in the case of Florian Tramer who, by exploiting systematic observation of inputs and outputs, reconstructed how Big ML and Amazon Machine Learning work and programmed a new algorithm with the same predictive capabilities as the previous ones (Tremer et al. 2016).

[14]   It is likely that false user accounts or traffic generated programmatically will be used to achieve this.

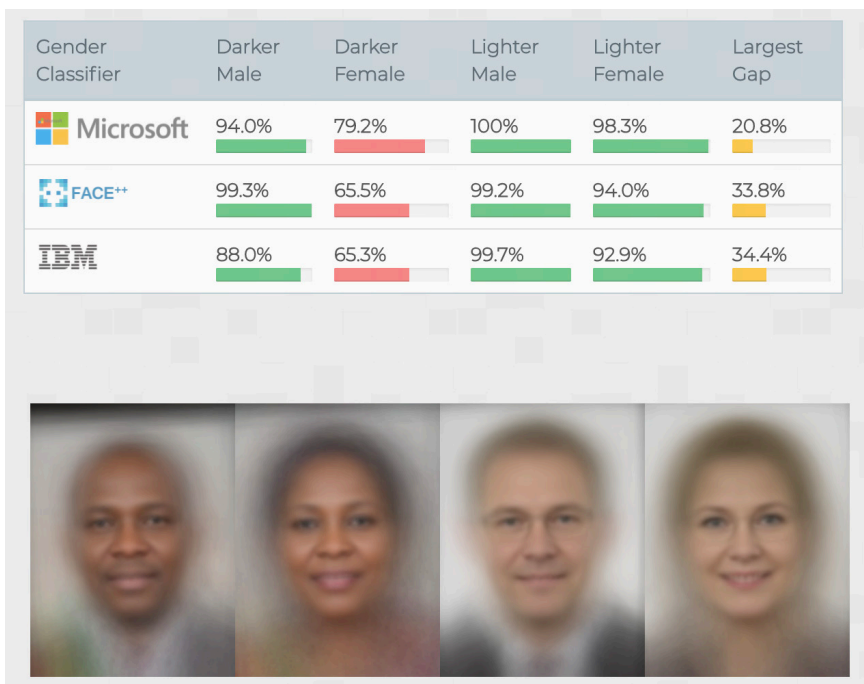| Gender Classifier	Darker Male	Darker Female	Lighter Male	Lighter Female	Largest Gap
Microsoft	94.0%	79.2%	100%	98.3%	20.8%
FACE++	99.3%	65.5%	99.2%	94.0%	33.8%
IBM	88.0%	65.3%	99.7%	92.9%	34.4%

Figure 5. Result of the Gender Shades project (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018), in which different facial recognition systems are analysed for their ability to recognise faces of different ethnicities and genders. Researchers divided images in four groups, and here they are displayed as overimposed composites. Source: <https://archive.is/lnNbb>, online on 31 December 2023.

ognition systems (IBM, Microsoft, and Face++). By looking at inputs and outputs, the researchers showed that facial recognition systems have lower accuracy rates in identifying dark-skinned female people due to an under-representation of gender and ethnicity in one of the training datasets analysed (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018). Figure 5 summarises the results of the aforementioned research by comparing the results of face classifications conducted with algorithms produced by different companies.

Typically, reverse engineering is applied to specific cases where the aim is to reconstruct a process, structure, or a way of organizing knowledge represented by an algorithm. In contrast, algorithmic auditing is implemented in more extensive contexts, such as the investigation of digital platforms such as Facebook and Amazon, with the objective of identifying operational patterns and profiling, without explicitly revealing the logic of operation of the underlying algorithms.

6. In-the-field approaches: catalogues of errors and collections of glitches

Alongside the analytical strategies illustrated so far, an emerging approach can be identified that, while not claiming to be exhaustive, makes a valuable contribution to debates concerning algorithmic exclusion. In what follows we examine projects aimed at producing what we define *catalogues of algorithmic errors*. These works focus on documenting the moments when the output of an algorithm is perceived by the user as unexpected or against expectations. As opposed to *in-vitro* approaches, these experiments aim at documenting the malfunctioning of algorithms *in-the-field*. The premise is that through the documentation of these moments it is possible to peek inside the black boxes of these technologies. Through the glitch, understood as a brief moment of misalignment or malfunction of the algorithm (Meunier et al. 2019), it is possible to get a glimpse, albeit a momentary one, inside the abstractions, completely foreign to human perception (Paglen 2016), that govern these technologies. Perhaps the most famous case worth mentioning dates back to 2015, when a Twitter user shared an image showing how image recognition algorithms in the Google Photos app classified his dark-skinned friends as "gorillas" (Vincent 2018). A term that describes these moments well is "algorithmic troubles" (Meunier et al. 2021): problematic events in which visible errors allow one to question what it means to be (or not to be) analysed, profiled, classified by algorithms of various kinds. The experiences we report on in this section thus forgo the ambition of explaining the "underlying" structures of the results that algorithms produce, but rather set out to collect their unexpected and often problematic behaviours. The collection process is accomplished unsystematically and through rudimentary data extraction methods. Glitches are saved and archived by capturing images from the screen, making use of the screenshot as a photographic witnessing tool (Frosh 2018; Ben-David 2020), or other vernacular data collection solutions (Nešović 2022). The work of collection (through more or less structured archives) makes it possible to give meaning to individual episodes and builds true samplers of what escapes the classification logics of algorithms. From this point of view, the experiences described in this section work on the rhetorical figure of the catalogue as a meaning-making device (Veca 2011): it is through collection and juxtaposition that each individual episode takes on a new meaning, pre-

cisely by virtue of its being shown in relation to other episodes. In a certain sense, these catalogues can be considered as "practical lists" whose elements, although very different from each other, undergo a kind of "contextual pressure" (Eco 2019) that makes them be perceived as a unified group. These catalogues of errors can take many different forms: from the more traditional image galleries, to formats that exploit the grouping logics of the very platforms where the errors are collected, such as the chains of content that can be created with threads on Twitter.[15]

Among the best-known cases worth mentioning is the ImageNet Roulette project (Crawford and Paglen 2019), which works on algorithmic image classification processes, exposing some of the most problematic, offensive, or more simply bizarre labels found in the "people" category of one of the most widely used training sets for automatic image recognition. When a user uploads a photo, the application returns an image showing the detected face and the label that the classifier has assigned to the image. The application purposely returns particularly disturbing labels. The project is accompanied by an image gallery of some of the most offensive and discriminatory labels, extracted from the dataset on which the tool is based.

While ImageNet roulette is a catalogue designed by two researchers, there are similar experiences that are the result of collective action. In 2020, when a Twitter user posted an image containing their face and another person's face, they realised that the platform's algorithm that determines how an image is cropped favoured his Caucasian face and excluded his African American colleague's from the preview (Hern 2020). This initial revelation initiated a collective experiment where several platform users tested the same cropping mechanism with disparate images. The result is a catalogue of errors and distortions of the image cropping algorithm that can be accessed by scrolling through users' posts.

A similar strategy is that of the @algoglitch[16] account. The profile, which aims to "account for collective sensitivity to algorithmic computations", collects and shares community-submitted screenshots documenting the problems people experience in their daily encounters with algorithms.

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[15]   The Twitter platform allows for the creation of "threads", i.e., chains of comments in which reflections and images can be linked from a single post.
[16]   <https://twitter.com/algoglitch>.

The result is a catalogue of a broad spectrum of algorithmic "misalignments" and errors: misclassifications, misplaced product recommendations and suggestions, content moderation problems, and, obviously, wrong machine translations. These episodes, which the authors of the collection call "algorithmic troubles", document the limitations of algorithms in performing various actions (recognizing, identifying, classifying, prioritizing, translating).

Although the cases illustrated in this section document very different algorithmic situations, and the formats of the collections mentioned herein are of different types (installations, image galleries, collections of screenshots), a thread can be identified that connects these experiences. These catalogues (of errors, deviances, misalignments, glitches, and troubles) are a first step toward determining what otherness means. Through the collection of items and situations which elude algorithms, they hint at what is possible but escapes classification systems. If identity is fixed (and identity defined through algorithms is even more so), these collections represent a sampling (albeit incomplete) of what is excluded or considered "other" by algorithmic classification systems. Collecting these anecdotes can be seen as an initial approach to creating more inclusive algorithms.

7. Conclusion

This text addresses the discourse on otherness in light of the pervasive presence of algorithmic technologies in every sphere of common life. Indeed, an increasing number of actions (classifying, predicting, analysing, selecting, generating) are being delegated to algorithmic systems that, following trained models, perform them in semi-autonomy. The optimistic view that envisions an automated and efficient society has been quickly replaced, at least in some cases, by the consideration that these technologies are characterised by the same biases and limitations as the societies that design them. Therefore, within this landscape, asking what constitutes the other for an algorithm is of utmost importance. Rather than reflect on this question from an abstract point of view, we made a brief survey of the strategies available for tracing the operation of algorithmic machines, with a focus on those devoted to the analysis of biases and limitations. We compared systematic in-vitro experiments that aim to identify the underlying structures of the results produced by algorithms with strategies that mere-

ly collect problematic results in thematic catalogues. The latter, working on the collection of malfunctioning moments of artificial intelligences, allow for the exposure and tracking of the failure of algorithms to adequately consider what comes out of classification logics. In the face of increasingly massive use of algorithms in various design domains, it emerges the risk of "weaponised" design (Tactical Tech 2018), understood as a practice that does not take into account the negative, exclusive, and harmful effects of design. We envision error catalogues as a useful tool for a more responsible approach to design that makes use of algorithms. A kind of sampler of otherness, constantly changing, that can be consulted to design with algorithms in a more equitable and inclusive way.

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Beyond the Wall, Beyond the Object
Alternative Designs Verging on Alterity

Design is all about creating things, no matter if material or immaterial, Flusser (1999) said. In more detail, it is always about "projected designs". It is about creating objects, where "object" has to be intended as «what gets in the way, a problem thrown in your path» (1999: 58). As Flusser remarked, indeed, the word *object* is derived from the Latin *objectum*, "problem": objects are obstacles to be overturned.

According to Zingale, who starts from Flusser, what gets in the way of the designer is always a "problematic objectuality". And it is possible to think of the expression plane of the artefacts to be designed, that is, the form of things, as a place of «*dialogical mediation* between the intentions of the project and the intentions of use» (Zingale 2008: 64, translation by the author). What happens, however, when a design project is concerned not with imagining a new artefact but with intervening on an already existing object of the world? What happens when the designer's aim is not to "innovate against" an object (following Maldonado 1970) but to transform its inner meaning?

Both in design fiction and in critical and speculative design (Bleecker 2009; Dunne and Raby 2013), the real object of design seems to reside outside design as mere production, as in traditional design (Pierce 2021; Lupetti 2022). From a semiotic perspective, it would be interesting to focus on design dynamics that seem to exclude production, by thinking in terms of design of new values even within existing objects. This is the aim of this paper, in an attempt that starts from some concrete projects.

1. Design fiction, speculative design, critical design. Some introductory remarks

A first step outside the design territories of utilitarian objects, be they tangible or intangible objects, products, or services, has been Julian Bleeck-

er's design fiction, since the launch of the Near Future Laboratory in 2009 (Bleecker 2009).

Directly quoting Eco (1998) and his idea that «fiction has the same function that games have», as a way to play with our past and present experience, Bleecker defined design fiction as «the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change» (Bleecker 2022: 20). That is, it is still about designing objects no longer in relation to a present *objectum* but rather in relation to fears, hopes, expectations about the future.

First of all, design fiction is about imagining a future and its issues and finding practical ways (the so-called "diegetic prototypes") to show at the same time the future scenario and a possible, critical solution. In the design fiction project titled *Slow Messenger* (2007), for example, the speed of receiving messages is inversely related to the emotional content of the message, critically addressing the overwhelming and compulsive communication practises of instant messaging.

A first, systematic and fundamental overview in the territories of "conceptual design", or "design about ideas", is in *Speculative Everything. Design, fiction, and social dreaming*, a book by Dunne and Raby (2013) based on their teaching activities at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. In this book, objects become conceptual and fantastical, precisely because they do not respond to real needs or serve concrete uses, but their purpose is to allow us to explore imaginative worlds.

In subsequent years, many have pointed out that the user-centred design paradigm is not the only one (Pierce et al. 2015), while the debate on the usefulness of critical design still continues (for a general, updated overview of the debate see Lupetti 2022).

In more detail, critical and speculative design practices have been accused of being unable to overturn the social, political and cultural problems they address, and new boundaries appear, in design literature, between "design doers" and "design thinkers" (Lupetti 2022). Such boundaries mark a difference between traditional production-oriented design and critical design that resists production and therefore they progress towards production. As Pierce (2021) claimed, indeed, conventional design could be defined as *progressional*, as it progressively moves towards production. Such a definition is not so far from Flusser's former conception about object and design. To quote Flusser again:

I come across obstacles in my path (come across the objective, substantial, problematic world); I overturn some of these obstacles (transform them into objects of use, into culture) in order to continue, and the objects thus overturned prove to be obstacles in themselves. [...] The more I continue, the more objective, substantial and problematic culture becomes. (Flusser 1999: 58)

At the opposite, according to Pierce (2021), critical design does not follow a linear path but has a *frictional* tendency. In other words, it would be a matter of *tension with progression*.

2. From alternative designs to alterity in design

A good way to try to recompose this divorce between concrete, productive, traditional design and theoretical, abstract, critical design, could be start thinking both traditional and alternative design and its practices in term of alterity.

From a designer perspective, it could be said that every *prefiguration* (Pierce 2021), i.e., every design practice between reflection (about an issue) and production (of an artefact), is a matter of exploration of the unknown. Here reference is made to Zingale (2022) and his theory of alterity *for* design and *in* design:

One might thus compare otherness to a territory to be passed through in many directions [...]. Various phenomenologies of alterity can be found in this territory. For sciences, alterity is the unknown to be known: from the laws governing the physical, chemical, biological world, to the verifiability or falsifiability of hypotheses, theories and heuristic models. For human and social sciences, alterity is the progressive discovery of human variety, [...] both in its individual and collective and cultural dimension. For design sciences, alterity is anything that is a consequence of artefacts, of the interactions they manage to trigger, of the social clothes they confirm or disrupt, of the visions they are able to open up. It is the other as the outcome of an effect of meaning. (Zingale 2022: 38, translation by the author)

In such a vision, every design practice deals with alterity as the (predictable or unpredictable) consequence of design practices in future, because every design practice is a movement from tradition to something new that is at the same time something Other. In innovation, the Other is what the

design practice is dealing with: Moka Bialetti, for example, would have not been possible without Neapolitan *cuccumella* (Zingale 2022: 18). In invention, then, the Other is the totally new dimension opened up by the design practice. In this sense, a sort of frictional tendency could be retraced in any kind of design – and it would be worth mentioning that design itself as a whole is a constant dialogue between alterities all along the design process, from company briefs to designer's vision to user needs, and so on (Zingale 2022: 24-25).

Bearing these premises in mind, it would be interesting to look more in-depth into what specifically defines alternative design and its frictional tendencies. In other words, as alternative design is resistant to progress in a linear way to go from a problem, an intention or a need to an object, this issue can be explored by taking a closer look in a semiotic perspective, in order to better describe how it deals with alterity.

3. A wall is not a line but an architecture. The Mexico-US wall as a base for alternative design projects

Interesting examples of alternative design are the various projects that Rael San Fratello has dedicated to the Mexico-US wall.

More than 700 miles of barriers have been built since 2006 between Mexico and the United States in order to intercept illegal immigrants. Architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello (Rael San Fratello), inspired by «people who, on both sides of the border, transform the wall, challenging its existence in remarkably creative ways» (Rael San Fratello 2021), developed numerous proposals for the United States-Mexico border wall. Their proposals are at the same time utopic alternatives and critical interventions, between design, art and activism.

The starting point of the project is a simple, powerful consideration: a border is not just a line on a map, but is a device redesigning at the same time spaces and human relationships and affecting the environment.

As Rael (2011) explained, the Mexico-US wall has to be considered a real architecture, and, we could add, a sort of *alterity machine* because of its ability to create strongly structured oppositions in previously connected areas: on both sides, the area near the wall has been removed from the market economy, isolated from public access and neutralized; on both sides, communities, neighbourhoods and families have been divided, with a mas-

sive «erosion of social infrastructure» (Rael 2011: 412); and in areas such as Nogales, Arizona, the fence works as a dam, diverting water flows on both sides and causing flooding and enormous environmental damage.

In this sense, the wall builds an artificial space where both natural processes and human movements are structured in different ways. In the area around the wall, there are no productive activities, which are instead present in the rest of the territory; there can be no commercial activities; one cannot move freely as is always under the control of the border police. And the establishment of this special regime was not agreed upon by both sides, as it was only desired and made by one side. Therefore, the wall is an additional instrument of migration control, completely unilateral, in the hands of the U.S.

Foucault talked about certain forms of heterotopic places as «privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis» (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 24). Thus, the wall and its sides could be described as a sort of crisis heterotopia for aspiring Mexican immigrants: a device to regulate and depower movements in the area, and to discourage (and at best prevent) movement from one area to another.

To face up to these problems, a designer cannot of course tear down the US-Mexico wall. However, considering the wall as a piece of architecture and thinking in terms of wall design can radically transform the wall and the way the wall transforms territory and human relations.

For example, the construction of energy infrastructure along the border could provide electricity across the border, and the steel walls could easily be retrofitted with panels to produce hot water for border cities (Rael 2011; Rael 2017). Such infrastructural improvements theorised by Rael could be categorised as traditional design proposals, i.e., as the response, in design and operational terms, to specific real needs.

In addition, however, Rael and San Fratello worked on other possible transformations of the wall, which can be ascribed more to critical and alternative design, as they are on the borderline between art and design.

These projects can be broken down into three categories, corresponding to three different phases of Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello's artistic and design work.

A first, totally exploratory phase is that of drawings and plans for an alternative wall, which in Rael San Fratello's words translated their initial idea
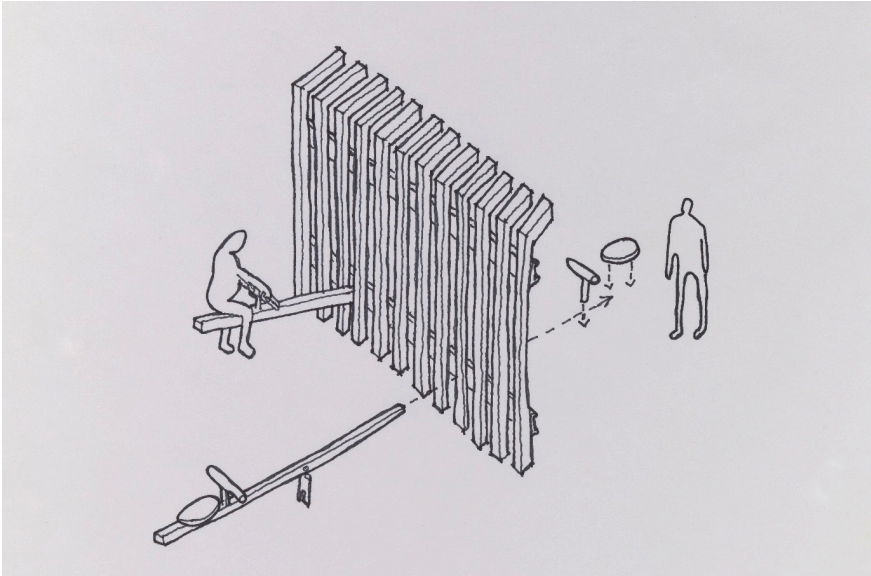
Figure 1. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, Sketch for *Teeter-Totter Wall*, 2013.*

of intervention onto paper (Rael San Fratello 2020). To the second category, linked to the exploration of the territory around the wall and its different "forms of life", correspond a series of travel notes and drawings (*Recuerdos*). The third category includes the actual design proposals, planned, realised and placed in the site, such as *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019), winner of Beazley Designs of the Year in 2020 award.

3.1. *Sketches, drawings and etchings*

The drawings can be simple sketches, like the one simply showing the positioning and the working for the teeter-totters (2013, SFMOMA collection), or more elaborated etchings, like *Horse Racing Wall* (2014), now in the MoMA collection (figs. 1-2).
If drawings are just a prefiguration of the final object with all its parts, etchings are much denser in meaning. First of all, they have been all created on reproductions of the 1882 Mexico-US topographic map, but the original

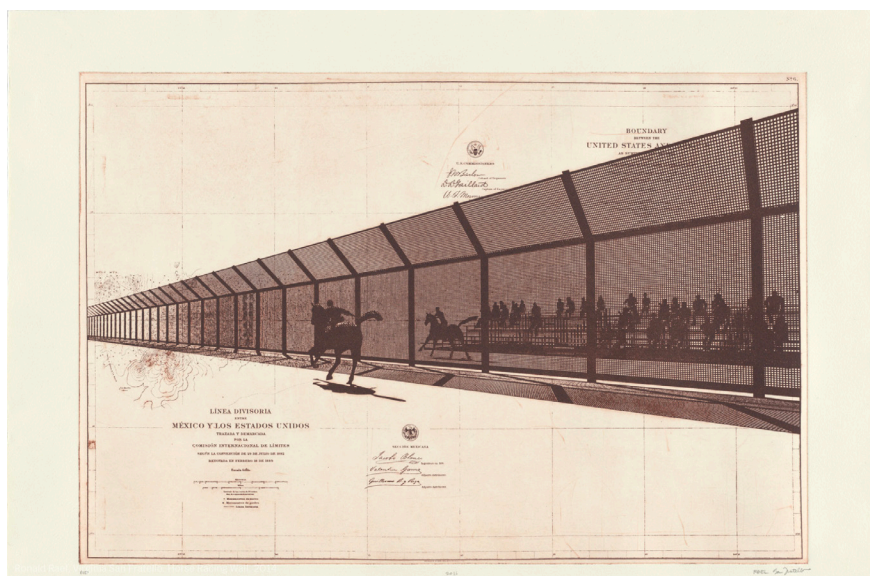* All the images are courtesy of Rael San Fratello.

Figure 2. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Horse Racing Wall*, 2014.

dividing line is no longer visible, as it has been replaced by a superposed illustration, as in Horse Racing Wall (fig. 2).

This illustration shows a complex double wall architecture with two horse riders riding and some people on the stands on the other side of the wall. In the upper right-hand corner, the outline of the wall is superimposed on the American English text of the paper, of which only the signatures remain visible. Instead, the following text in Spanish, located in the bottom right-hand corner, remains legible:

Línea divisoria
Entre
Mexico y los Estados Unidos
Trazada y demarcada
Por la
Comisión Internacional de Límites
Según la convención de 29 de julio de 1882
Renovada en febrero 18 de 1889

Figure 3. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes* (*Volley Ball Wall*), 2000-2014.

Such an intervention works by mixing the temporal and design planes, placing the result of a design prefiguration in the past, in a counterfactual way. Indeed, under an engraving that seems to document something already existing and common – the use of the wall as a divider for two distinct corridors – the date of the creation of the dividing line between Mexico and the United States is clearly legible. The short circuit between 1889 (the date of the treaty renewal) and the result of an imaginative project (an unprecedented horse racing wall) brings with it two results: that of institutionalising, in a paradoxical way, a project of alternative design, and that of giving a historical patina to such a (critical, alternative) fiction, showing how far back the roots of the division between the two countries are.

3.2. The Nuevo Grand Tour and its souvenirs

The second collection of projects is called *Recuerdos* (souvenir). It is composed by a journey and a series of snowballs, keychains and postcards. The journey documents

Figure 4. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes* (*Xylophone Wall*), 2000-2014.

a series of scenarios, real and imagined, along the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall. [...] Almost exactly the distance of the Grand Tour, the migratory route for upper-class European men that went from London to Rome, this journey stretches along the southern border for 1,931 miles. This *Nuevo* Grand Tour traces the consequences of a security infrastructure that stands both conceptually and physically perpendicular to human migration. (Rael San Fratello 2021)

Both the journey and souvenirs account for single acts of resistance to the wall as a simple boundary, documenting real or just imagined wall transformation as remarkable examples of a civil (and human) resistance to the wall, systematically subverting not the wall itself but the idea of the wall as a device of exclusion.

Each snowball acts as a memorialization of an individual act of resistance, by showing, as in a precious transparent shrine, something significant to remember: a group of people on the beach playing volley (*Volley Ball Wall*), two children playing on the steel wall (*Xylophone Wall*), a burrito stand for a culinary exchange (*Burrito Wall*). Prohibited actions (such as playing games or having a business along the wall) are visualised as real, and

Figure 5. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes (Burrito Wall)*, 2000-2014.

remind us, by contrast, that such common activities are actually prohibited by the heterotopic regime of the wall (figs. 3-5). The memorialisation of similar possible Others of the wall also passes through the depowering of the wall as a potentially infinite line. The glass sphere encloses and delimits the wall in its perimeter: it is a piece of wall that we are faced with, not the wall itself. For this reason, too, the contrast between the wall as it actually is and the many possible individual acts of resistance to exclusion and division becomes even stronger.

3.3. A project, for real. Teeter-Totter Wall

If drawing and etching works as a prefiguration of a (potential or counterfactual) *future*, we could say, and the *Recuerdos* as a memorialization of a possible *past*, there is one Rael San Fratello project working on the *present* of the US-Mexico wall.
On 28 July 2019, indeed, the two activists and their troupe installed three pink teeter-totters into the border wall for children and families from El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to play on (figs. 6-7).

Figures 6-7. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Teeter-Totter Wall*, installation, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez boundary, July 28, 2019.

For quite an hour, a small (but real) section of the wall became a site of connection, communication and exchange, where «actions that take place on one side of a teeter totter having direct consequence on the other side» (Rael San Fratello 2020). Thanks to *Teeter-Totter Wall*, the children were able to

play together, as equals, looking each other in the eye and swapping roles, alternately going up and down, as the several photos of that day testify.

Such a device does not abolish the wall but uses it in a new way, transforming the high steel boundaries in the main infrastructure for a children swing. In a first step of the project (documented by the very first plans and drawings), the wings of the swing were so long that it looked like quite able to launch a person across the border. In the final version it is just 14 feet long, lifting one off the ground 18 feet just like a classic swing (Rael San Fratello 2020).

In other words, the *Teeter-Totter Wall* has been designed not to trespass the border, but to radically transform its meaning by keeping it working. What happens, anyway, is that for children playing on the swing the wall is no longer a wall, because a brand-new connection has been established between the two sides of the borders. During the play, there is no longer structural separation between two sides but a new peer-to-peer exchange thanks to the wall itself.

As Virginia San Fratello said, «We ended the event because the children were tired on playing on the Teeter-Totter like they would at any park» (Rael San Fratello 2020). For a few minutes, there were no longer US people and Mexican people or obligations and interdictions, as they all were playmates and could play as long as they wished. In those minutes, the wall did not move by a millimetre but its meaning changed for those children.

4. Between discursive transgression and dialogic alterity. Some final remarks

In describing the various projects making up Rael San Fratello's intervention on the Mexico-US wall, we tried to emphasise how in the three different project directions the dysphoric reality of the wall is confronted with a new alternative reality.

The main function of the wall, which is to exclude, to differentiate, to unilaterally regulate access, is not cancelled out: however, treating the wall as part of a larger infrastructure (like a net for playing volleyball, or like a room divider) ends up "narcotising" (Eco 1979) its main function (exclusion) and putting new values into circulation (freedom of movement, within the rules of the game of volleyball, as well as sharing, exchange, both commercial and culinary).

Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello actually spoke of *depowering* the wall (Rael San Fratello 2021), not overcoming it, and this term is revealing. In traditional design, the response to a problematic objectuality can be a completely new object, capable of performing the same function better, or a whole range of new products, in «a process of proliferation and diversification» (Maldonado 1993: 3). And it is also possible to imagine a new object that better embodies the same function in a completely new form (redesign).

What happens instead in the case of the alternative design projects by Rael San Fratello? In all the projects we examined there is not a classic overturn of the problematic object but there is a sort of frictional juxtaposition of the problematic object and a new alternative object that grows on the first one. From a discursive perspective, at the level of actualization of narrative structures (Greimas and Courtés 1989 [1976]), the enunciatee/observer (i.e., the possible, imaginative user) is invited to weigh up the functional and symbolic value of the existing Mexico-US wall against the alternative one, which could seem physically similar but is perceived as radically different. At the same time, he/she is invited to weigh a dysphoric reality against a euphoric alternative reality, and to react in favour of this second one.

In this sense, these design projects seem to work quite like planar visual representations, by building a whole meaning universe in itself, with its inner system of oppositions and values (Greimas 1989 [1984]), or rather like visual identities in a semantic universe, always implying «a system of transformations which set the rules for a given semantic universe» (Floch 2000 [1995]: 62).

In *Teeter-Totter Wall*, for example, the verticality of the wall is opposed to the horizontality of the swing, and such a swinging movement reveals, by contrast, how static and constrictive the real wall is.

In *Burrito Wall*, the solidity of the steel boundary forbidding free exchange goes in contrast with the permeable nature of the culinary stand, with the wall just distinguishing the chef area from the consumer area:

The burrito wall accommodates for a food cart to be inserted into the wall. The proximity to the wall and the security overhang create shade. Seating is built into the wall, and food, conversation, or a binational game of footsies can occur across the border. (Rael 2011: 414)

Another example of brand new re-using, in terms of meaning and of symbolic values, of the same infrastructure and its main key function (to separate, to forbid movement, to obstruct gaze) is the *Confessional Wall*, developed in the *Recuerdos* collection but directly taken from the real wall' stories:

The division created by the wall often heightens border exchanges. In Friendship Park, beach park that spans both San Diego, CA, and Tijuana, Mexico, intimate exchanges were common. Each Sunday afternoon holy communion was offered through the fence (increasingly as an act of civil disobedience). Here the fence serves as an opportunity for confession, where both confessor and priest must ask that his trespasses be forgiven, as they must transcend the border to perform the rite. (Rael 2011: 414)

In all these alternative design projects, the redesigned wall is invested with new meaning by the questioning of the discourse of the real wall, conceived as a problematic object for anyone concerned with the freedom of movement and welfare of migrants at the border.

Ferri *et al.* (2014), by proposing an analysis of critical design across a collection of exemplars, talked about "discursive transgression" as their main common feature: «they transgress existing discourses, usually through surprising juxtapositions» (2014: 360).

From our point of view, we may also speak of these frictional juxtapositions in terms of putting several positions into mutual dialogue, as something that is able to simultaneously show reality and its possible Other and is thus able, through this dialogical dynamic, to make people think about reality in a new way.

This is what Zingale calls "crossing the negative", which occurs when «negation and contradiction allow the emergence first of a resistance to the inertia of thought, then of an alternative vision of it» (Zingale 2022: 19, translation mine).

What is at stake in the projects on the Mexico-US wall, indeed, is not just a question of *wall design*, as Rael (2011) himself defined it: it is not just a matter of designing a wall that is habitable, or friendly, for migrants, but rather is a matter of showing the iniquity of the real wall and the forced separations it prescribes, and of showing the need to overcome divisions also on a social, political and economic level.

In this sense, too, Rael San Fratello's design proposals are critical design to all intents and purposes, precisely because the proposal of an alternative vision passes through an exploration of alterity, and in many ways – of a possible Other with respect to the real, but also of the Other (the migrant) with respect to us.

In conclusion, the fact that alternative and critical designs are not design practices dealing with traditional production may not be a problem, from our perspective. This is not only because, as Lupetti argued, «critical design practices can be in tension with one idea of progression» but they «can converge towards production over time» (Lupetti 2022: 88). It is also because, in our opinion, examples such as these of alternative design work on the progression and production of new value systems, hinting at, or even designing, new possibilities and possible Others.

It may be interesting to further explore this line of investigation in order to more thoroughly describe alternative and critical design projects as well as their meaningful dynamics at play.

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The Queer City
Public Space and Alterity

1. Introduction

Which are the correlations and potential between the concepts of alterity and queerness? What does *queer* mean? What is a *queer space*? How and why the concept of queerness can be connected to cities? Through an exploration of the meanings contained in these powerful concepts and a brief overview of some interesting projects and practices, this chapter aims at suggesting how the reflection on otherness in relation to queerness intended as a way of *doing through acts of resistance* (Larochelle 2021: 137), can and should impact the way we design, in order to create future cities that are more queer, inclusive, hospitable, accessible, safe and flexible.

2. Queerness and alterity: points of contact

Looking at the numerous and historically widespread studies and debates on the philosophical and ethical concept of *alterity* (or *the Other*, or *otherness*), it is easy to instantly connection it with the concept of *queerness*. Alterity, stemming from the Latin word "alter" meaning "other", invites us to explore the realms beyond our own familiar realities. It challenges us to step outside our comfort zones, engage with the unknown, and embrace human diversity's richness. The term *queer*, originally used in Anglophone countries to indicate something odd, negatively weird, and then as a harmful slur for LGBTIA+ people, as the opposite of "straight", was then claimed by some activists in the USA at the beginning of the 1990s, such as the Queer Nation association, an LGBTIA+ activist organisation founded in March 1990 in New York City by HIV/AIDS activists from the group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), after the escalation of anti-gay violence and prejudice on the streets and media, to encapsulate the experiences of those who exist beyond conventional norms.

Nowadays, we could try to define *queer* (even if the actual possibility and legitimacy of the action of defining it in a precise way are at the heart of a considerable debate that is still going on among researchers, scholars and activists) as an umbrella term, fluid and ambiguous, that describes any sexual orientation or gender identity that is not heterosexual or cisgender. Queer theorist Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick defined queer as «the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically» (Sedgwick 1993: 8). Indeed, the initial presupposition that originated the process of claiming the old slur is also to be identified in the strong desire of the LGBTIA+ communities and activists to overcome the too strong and limited definitions of the acronym, defying rigid categorisations, gathering the restlessness and rebellion of those who do not recognise themselves in the cages of binary and rigid sexual genders. From this presupposition stems the intrinsic opposition to a firm definition of the term. The term can also be used to indicate not only a person but also places, contexts and, more generally «whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant», in the words of Halperin (Halperin 1995: 62).

Therefore, the concept of queerness also has, apart from a notion related to sexual orientation and gender identity, a deeper meaning of going beyond definitions themselves, embracing fluidity, challenging and disrupting binaries and norms; citing Halperin again: «there is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. "Queer" then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative» (Halperin 1995: 62). The term queer can be seen as «a polysemic term, or rather a floating signifier, which transfers its instability to the nouns it qualifies when used as an adjective» (Bernini 2017: 13). This characteristic is the very core of the concept of queerness and allows us to better understand what is meant by the notion of "queer space", which will be better explained subsequently.

This indefinability of the concept is at the foundation of the close relationship between queerness and alterity: in fact, according to Loidolt, also «alterity by definition always escapes the efforts of knowledge wanting to capture and explain it» (Loidolt 2018: 353). Another point of contact with the concept of alterity and the dialectic process that it intrinsically brings

with itself, as previously pointed out by Zingale (2022), is the development of the Queer Theory. Starting from the revolution operated by Teresa de Lauretis, who made the powerful and apparently contradictory act of combining the dirty and street-born term *Queer* to the term *Theory*, which instead belonged to the ivory tower of the Academia. She joined the two terms to go beyond the field of the Gender Studies, at the time more established, with a negative dialectic. This put in crisis the dominant cultural thesis of the "naturality" of the gender identity (Zingale 2022; de Lauretis 1990). The point of queerness is precisely its power to question, push limits beyond what is known and definite, and transgress into a negative and contradictory dialectic to open up to alternatives.

To be queer, though, can mean a lot of different things. Under the queer umbrella a plurality of subjectivities lie, one more marginalized than the other, according to an intersectional[1] approach. Moreover, considering the relationship between alterity and subjectivity, this is another evident point of contact with the concept of alterity: «the point of departure for an experience of alterity is the experience of a subjectivity» (Loidolt 2018: 354). We could say, relying to the thought of Hannah Arendt and citing Peg Birmingham, that in fact alterity is «at the very heart of plurality» (Birmingham 2006: 87).

The dimension of plurality, in the queer discourse related to otherness and sociality, is particularly interesting because of this dichotomy between me-you, I-we, which is the foundation of our sociality and about which, as Butler said, «one can reference an "I" only in relation to a "you": without a "you" my own story becomes impossible» (Butler 2005: 32). Therefore, to *do queer* implies embracing plurality, going past the self to reach a more communitarian "we-mode", to say that with Munt referring to Tuomela: «the impetus of queer theory during the 1990s, following in the footsteps of the feminist politics of the decade before, was deeply tactical and attuned, communitarian and utopian, representing the "we-mode" rather

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[1]   Term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989: «Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking». To read more: Crenshaw and Kimberle, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies", University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989, 1 (1989): 139-167.

than the "I-mode"» (Munt 2013: 235; Tuomela 2007). This «ontological plurality of subjectivities» needs to be actualized «by engaging in certain activities: speaking, acting and judging. These activities disclose a "who", the uniqueness of a person's perspective, which becomes visible only in the equally realised togetherness of a "we". The architecture of the political space is built up by acting and speaking in public, which forms the closely intertwined ontological core domain of plurality» (Loidolt 2018: 367). This actualizing of plurality in the public space can provide individual subjectivities a place «to go beyond the intimacy of private relations» that «allows for worldly experiences of meaning, reality, and freedom that cannot be supplemented otherwise» (*ivi*: 369). The possibility to pluralize the social order and insert it into the sphere of the extra-ordinary, «opens a sphere of genuine otherness, or alienness» (Leistle 2016: 6).

To conclude, it is possible to claim that queerness captures the essence of alterity, with the understanding that the human experience is intricate and cannot be enclosed in predetermined categories. By erasing the boundaries of societal norms, queer perspectives disrupt the notion of a singular, unchanging reality and foster an inclusive appreciation of the extensive spectrum of human identities and self-expressions. By recognizing queerness as an integral part of alterity, it is possible to challenge the status quo, fostering dialogue as well as an understanding that transcends traditional boundaries and acknowledges the rich tapestry of human existence.

3. The Queer City

What is the relationship between queerness and space, in particular urban public space? And why is it interesting to study queerness in relation to cities? A reflection by Pavka is interesting to make this connection explicit: «though queerness may not be a place, it is inescapably spatial. […] Whether through a terrorist act or police intervention, the goal was to destroy a certain physical place in an attempt to destroy the communities who used them. Here space was inseparable from queerness itself» (Pavka 2020). Moreover, as the 1990s Queer Nation Manifesto reads, «being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are». Furman and Mardell also wrote that «for those unable to mingle, love and connect with the people they desire in private spaces, often the public sphere – in the interstices and gaps of cities, and at times of day

when the rest of the population might be absent – is the place where their queer lives can be lived most freely» (2022: 155). Therefore, starting from this and the typical metaphor of being *in or out the closet*, the dimension of public space has always been intrinsically connected to the LGBTIA+ community and the concept of queerness, also because we should not forget that «queer theory was initially street-thinking» (Munt 2013: 234), and, specifically, it was born in city streets: «the metropolis has been positioned as a constitutive part of queer identity» (Vickers 2010: 59).

Furthermore, the dimension of the *agora*, of the public space, as reported in the previous paragraph, has been connected to alterity thanks to its ability to allow individuals to interact through discussion, favouring the encounter with the Other and the discovery of their identity in comparison with otherness (Arendt 1958). Hence, space can be seen «as the sphere enabling multiplicity. Space, then, is always under construction – it is never complete, never closed» (Misgav 2015: 1209). This powerful concept of possibility and openness can be linked to the queer vision of the world.

Following Lefebvre's famous idea of producing space using the body that constitutes the space and is constituted by the space – «each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space» (Lefebvre 1991: 170) – let us think about the city and its inhabitants in their physicality as a combination: humans are bodies that meet with the "urban body" of the city. Both cities and humans are a combination of different bodies: indeed, people inhabit public spaces mainly when meeting other people. The relationships between humans and their bodies are part and parcel of urban life and public spaces: therefore, it is important to understand, from this perspective, how being in the public urban space happens, and how people and their bodies meet and inhabit the urban space (Pasqui 2022). Therefore, in this sense, what about the queer bodies, all the bodies that are different from the "neutral standard" which, canonically, according to the androcentric view of the "male as norm" (Kotthoff and Wodak 1997), has as its reference the cis-gender heterosexual able white man? Public spaces are not neutral: they have historically been created and designed to support and facilitate the traditional roles of the male gender, with the perspective of the male experience being universally identified as the "norm" (Kern 2021). As a consequence, in the absence of a different perspective, when designing something (not only public spaces), the designed

outcome will be suited to men: «when planners fail to account for gender, public spaces become male spaces by default» (Perez 2019: 65). This issue has been central since the 1990s in the studies of Sexualities' Geographers such as Binnie, Bell and Valentine, who stated that space is actively produced as heterosexual and heteronormative (Binnie 1997; Bell and Valentine 1995). This issue has led to the suppression of non-normative sexualities, to governing and silencing queer desires and embodiments in space through various overt and covert mechanisms of spatial control (Valentine 2000). Puwar defined non-normative and "other" bodies as "space invaders": the status of invaders «highlights how privileged positions have historically been "reserved" for specific kinds of bodies» (Puwar 2004: 144). Those that are instead perceived as "invisible", without corporeality, own a place of power. «The ideal representatives of humanity are those who are not marked by their body and who are, in an embodied sense, invisible» (Puwar 2004: 58). This may represent a paradox, since queer subjectivities and queer lives also suffer from the phenomenon of "invisibilisation" in the public space, but this is caused by the suppression of otherness, which does not produce privilege as a result but only oppression. «Queerness then, is like a ghost, at the border of the visible and the invisible, disturbing the certainties of social reality with disordered desires, perhaps even enchanting us with possibility» (Munt 2013: 232). On this topic of possibility, I will expand subsequently, in the conclusion paragraph.

Hence, we have seen how public space often represents a rationalisation and organisation of the experience, in which sometimes the bodies are seen as something to control, govern and unify according to a "norm": this limits freedom, flexibility and queerness. Urban space should be able to take charge of the plurality of life forms, facilitating social cohesion between its inhabitants, by being accessible, versatile, inclusive and safe. Instead, now, the street remains one of the most dangerous places for the LGBTIA+ community: Italy, according to the *Rainbow Map & Index* of 2023, is 34th out of 49 in Europe in terms of security level and rights for the queer community, with just 25% of LGBTIA+ human rights achieved. Moreover, 48% of hate-motivated attacks in Italy happen in streets, parks, squares and parking lots (2019 data from LGBTI Survey Data Explorer).

But what can be defined as a *queer space*? What are the components of a truly *safe space* for the LGBTIA+ and women community? In history, the queer

space does not have much to do with the physicality of the space (or, at least, not only with that), and neither does the sense of belonging and security that the queer community could possibly feel: as George Chauncey argued, there is «no queer space, there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use» (1995: 224). Maybe «queer space is space in the process of, literally, taking place, of claiming territory» (Reed 1996: 64). Indeed, taking space, metaphorically and physically, in the political debates as well as in the media, arts and, of course, cities, is a crucial topic for the community: it is important to obtain space, to exit from the closet of heteronormativity and binary gender system in which queer people feel invisible. The public dimension is a historical issue in this sense. For years, indeed, the queer public spaces were "normal" places that were adopted bottom-up from the community with a different purpose and made "queer", historically often by the practice of *cruising*:[2] public urinals are an example of this (Zarzycki 2022), but also other public spaces such as parks – Central Park in NY is a historical example, as we can read on the website "NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project" – or public transport, like in the case of the last wagon of the metro in Mexico City or, still in Mexico, the case of "La Glorieta de los Insurgentes", a public square with an important metro station some areas of which have been occupied by queer people and which is now is the most important cultural, social and urban meeting point for the LGBTIA+ community. (Furman and Mardell 2022). When instead there is a top-down initiative, like in the case of some recent public interventions, such as the rainbow street crossings, a phenomenon happens called "*usualising*" (Arup 2021), which is aimed to make the existence of the queer community known and usual to the general public in order to reduce hate-crimes, but without any imposed conformity (Zarzycki 2022). According to more radical opinions, these kinds of surface gestures are not enough, because they are in dissonance with the true living conditions of queer and trans people, who often face widespread violence that also involves the institutions, and because it is difficult to claim that increased visibility means less homophobia (Zarzycki 2022).

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[2]   Cruising for sex can be defined as the act of looking for casual sex in specific public spaces known as "cruising grounds". This practice has a longstanding place in LGBTIA+ history as a radical act, even if in most cases it only involved gay men. To better expand the topic connecting it to placemaking, it is possible to read "Cruising Place. The Placemaking Practices of Men who Have Sex with Men", *The Journal of Public Space*, 4(4), 179-186, <https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v4i4.1240> by Bezemes, J. (2019).

It should be noted that the notion of queer space is different from that of "gay/lesbian spaces"; this was shown by several pieces of Urban Geography research that aimed at going beyond the study of the "gayborhoods", which still rely on and uphold a distinct binary between heterosexuality/homosexuality, to focus instead on «the diversity of experiences and the multiplicity of sites and situations in which "sexual dissidents" create spaces of safety and visibility» (Davis 1995: 287). Indeed, citing Larochelle, «the simple fact that non-heterosexual or non-cisgender people are present in a given location does not in and of itself render it queer – rather the space becomes queered through action and negotiation» (Larochelle 2021: 137). The point is seeing queer spaces as spaces that are not fixed but are rather «something rooted in the continuous breaking down of cis-heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, colonial, classist, and ableist structures» (*ibidem*), thus mainly focusing on of *doing queer,* with a queer approach rooted in action, rather than on *being queer* in a codified and fixed way.

In the next paragraph, some projects or practices taking place in urban public spaces that adopt this queer approach will be commented.

4. Queering the urban space: practices and reflections

Interesting projects or practices about Queer spaces in the city usually revolve around a number of recurring themes. One of them is mapping. Mapping is a way to make visible the invisible, to tell the unknown and invisible stories related to queer people that make those spaces queer. In most cases, queer public spaces are not just spaces expressly identified and presented as specifically designed for LGBTIA+ people for commercial purposes such as gay neighbourhoods and bars. Historically queer public spaces have always have been spaces without any connotation, spaces that are also lived and used by all other inhabitants of the city but maybe at other times of the day or with different modes or codes of communication. Another common topic is the ephemerality of these places and practices, and this is the case of common everyday experiences of people, or of radical activism interventions, or performances, such as ballroom shows or drag queen walks. This topic is connected to another important dimension (discussed below with other examples) that is the physical re-appropriation and occupation of space. The projects lie at the border between activism actions, participatory arts, web-design, performances, storytelling, graphics and communi-

cation, and physical installations. The projects chosen and described in the following paragraphs are shown following the order from the more digital/ephemeral to the most tangible/permanent ones.

Queering the Map by Lucas Larochelle
<https://www.queeringthemap.com/>

As Lucas Larochelle explained (2021: 134-135): «Queering the Map is a community generated counter-mapping platform that digitally archives queer experiences in relation to physical space. The interactive map provides an interface with which to collaboratively archive the cartography of queer life – from park benches to the middle of the ocean – in order to preserve queer histories and unfolding realities. From collective action to stories of coming out, encounters with violence to moments of rapturous love, Queering the Map functions as a living archive of queer life across the world».
The project was first launched in 2017 and then relaunched in 2018, and since then over 86,000 stories of queer existence and resistance – in 23 languages – from across the world have been shared through it. According to its creator, «Queering the Map is not simply a map of queer stories, it is itself a queer map, a queer space» (Larochelle 2021: 142).
The focal points of the project are:
– the desire to move away from thinking queer space as fixed, toward an approach to queer placemaking (*doing* queer) that is rooted in action, in acts of resistance;
– the connection to the concepts of ephemerality and lingering of queer performance of José Esteban Muñoz (Muñoz 2009) and on queer phenomenology of Sara Ahmed (Ahmed 2006);
– the absence of algorithmic control of the platform, allowing for free and chaotic wandering, without privileging some contents in spite of others;
– the focus on the aspect of opening spaces of possibility thanks to the grassroots participation of the users, with full freedom of expression: «To post on Queering the Map constitutes a kind of giving, sharing one's own experience of finding, if only briefly, a space of queer possibility. These experiences might then allow others who come into contact with them to also "find" themselves—reflected back, though only in fragments, in another's story» (Larochelle 2021: 146);

Figure 1. A heart-wrenching message written by a person living in Gaza. Source: <http://www.queeringthemap.com>.
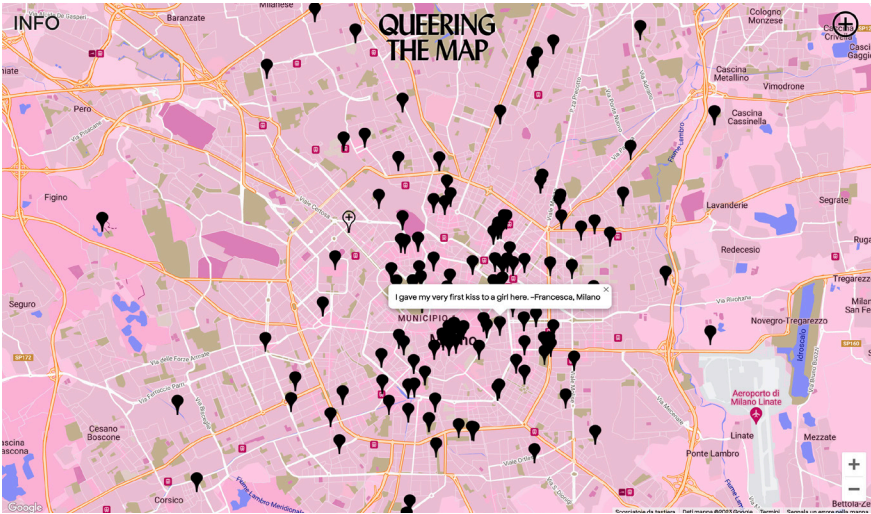

Figure 2. A girl maps the location of a very important moment of her life as a queer person. Source: <http://www.queeringthemap.com>.

– the anonymity and lack of user profiles, due to a refusal of fixed self-definitions and to departure from «the stability of the digital individual towards the cacophony of collectivity» (*ivi*: 144).

"No le tenemos miedo a la noche" (*We are not afraid of the night*)
by Comparsa Drag
<https://www.instagram.com/comparsadrag/>
&
"Milano Queer Tours" by Nina's Drag Queens
<https://www.ninasdragqueens.org/drag-evolution/tutta-mia-la-citta/>

In these two cases, the main topic involves drag queen arts and performances in public space as a means of re-appropriating of the streets and conveying messages through ephemeral walks and performances.
Comparsa Drag is a collective of drags in Buenos Aires, born in 2018, while Nina's Drag Queens is a Drag and Drama group established in 2007 in Milan. The topic of making visible what is apparently invisible in the city is also present in these two projects – as we can read on the Instagram account of Nina's Drag Queens, «we draw lines, we invent geographies where they are not available» – thanks to their queer tours of the city, which through performance and physical re-appropriation of public space, allow to share stories with participants and show them public spaces under a different light. Their projects and actions are powerful acts of resistance, queerness and otherness in the public space, because, as we can read in the book *Queer Spaces* about Comparsa Drag's performances, «their queer wandering and excessive behaviour is the radical disruption of normative city manners, an urban practice that explores territories of sensuality and passion within ordinary spaces» (Furman and Mardell 2022).
In particular, "No le tenemos miedo a la noche" was a nocturnal city tour to show a group of foreign artists the city Buenos Aires, including the disadvantaged neighbourhoods that the media describe as dangerous but are actually dense with the coexistence of otherness and differences.
"Milano Queer Tour" also takes place at night. Marching together as a group guided by a Drag Queen during the first hours of the night is a powerful act. As a participant, you feel you are perceived (sometimes well, sometimes with curiosity, other times less well) by other people passing by. With a catchy and dense storytelling that also involves audio recordings, videos and collective performances (such as little dances in the public space), Nina's Drag Queens guide the group of participants in a travelling, informative and ironic show about LGBTIA+ historical places, important

Figure 3. People discovering the queerness of Milan during the Milano Queer Tour by Nina's Drag Queens. Photo by Gianfranco Falcone.

Figure 4. A drag performing and guiding the participants of Milano Queer Tour. Photo by Gianfranco Falcone.

events and people of Milan, trying to collectively find an answer to the questions that are at the basis of the tour and that are written on their website: "is Milan male? Is Milan female? Is Milan queer? And, while we're at it, what's queer?"

Serigrafistas Queer
<https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/serigrafis-tas-queer/>
&
fierce pussy
<https://fiercepussy.org/>

Serigrafistas Queer, a "non-group" as they define themselves, and the art collective *fierce pussy* are two projects made by queer women that use graphic design to convey radical queer messages in the public space. The first one is Argentinian and was born in 2007, while the second one is older, it was launched in 1991 in New York City, at the time of the ACT UP fight against AIDS, and was one of the first groups of artists to tackle the topic of lesbian visibility in public space. They are both still active. Their approach is based on the collective making of queer graphic communication, such as posters, banners, pamphlets, T-shirts, flags, etc., with low-tech methods, to be then distributed with guerrilla actions in the public space or during manifestations and parades.

It's queer not just the message they spread but is also their course of action: for example, in the case of Serigrafistas Queer, «the workshops move silk-screening away from its status as technique or from printing as the final aim, and instead concentrate on everything that happens in the process: collaborations, sharing, carrying out specific tasks, the ideas that generate new projects». In their 2022 project "Rancho Cuis" for the German art festival Documenta Fifteen, they also tackled the topic of place-making «through collective learning and intersectional healing with local organisations and collectives working on issues from gender violence to land rights», as we can read on the Documenta Fifteen website.

To sum up, the main characteristics of the project are: «the commitment to the use of screen printing and graphic experiences as poetic-political tools that enable the creative production of critical statements towards a hostile present, the choice of a technique that allows a high possibility of reproduction at very low cost and that can easily be socialised allowing the incorporation of multiple actors into the action, the construction of a silk screen production workshop in the public space and the transfor-

mation of the street as the primary scene of critical intervention through visual devices and the close relationship with social movements» (Cuello 2013: 6).

Among the projects realised by *fierce pussy*, especially interesting for the presence of public space are "Bathroom Project at Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center" (1994) and "Bathroom Project at the LGBT Community Center" (2009). These are site-specific installations in public toilets, which are a core space for queer people who still suffer from gender binarism related issues. The messages were spread on all the surfaces of the site, such as mirrors, hygienic paper and, of course, walls, according to an approach that the group itself defined as «bombing the wall» (Favorite and Lerer 2020: 32). Similarly interesting is the project "Re-naming the Streets" (1992), in which using spray paint, stencils and cardboard, they re-named the streets along the Pride Parade in honour of some famous queer women, as a way to denounce their scarce representation in the toponymy of the city, an issue that is still very relevant as we can see in the project "Mapping Diversity" (<https://mappingdiversity.eu/>).

Their first series of posters, which the collective named "list posters", are interesting because of the concept of queer identity fluidity and the re-appropriation of slur language. In an interviewed to Favorite and Lerer, fiercepussy explained: «The early "list" posters were about reclaiming language. Taking what was derogatory and homophobic and misogynist and owning it, turning it and putting it back out, and using the power of that (poster insert). For example, the word "queer" was a word that was negative and used against us. So "I am a _____ and proud" was a provocative thing to be saying. One of the things that's interesting about the "list" poster is that we chose multiple terms to identify ourselves. It was never, "I am a one thing", it was always seven or eight different things and three different versions of it because, on one hand, there was no language with which to describe ourselves except for some derogatory language, or language that we claimed, like "amazon". But there was also the desire not to be defined in one way or another. To be all of these things. You can be all these things, you can be many things. It isn't static – it's a spectrum. The poster still works because it's inclusive».

Queer installations – Babs Baldachino, Proud Little Pyramid, Boudoir Babylon – by Adam Nathaniel Furman

These are three recent examples of physical installations made by Adam Nathaniel Furman, a designer that is currently basing his works and research on the topic of queer spaces and how to translate queerness into shapes, materials and colours.

"Babs Baldachino" was created as a monument to LGBTQ+ people of Birmingham for the city's contemporary arts festival Fierce Festival, and was then disassembled and relocated to various public spaces in Birmingham. Aaron Wright, artistic director at Fierce Festival, explained: «We really wanted to commission an artwork that we could take to suburbs of Birmingham to act as a queer beacon, in places that might not be thought of as queer». The author describes it as «a little temple to the queer spirit of the West Midlands, a small but loud offering to the camp brilliance that is always so present in the city, one of the great anchors of queer culture in Britain» (Peacock 2022).

"Proud Little Pyramid" was created to celebrate the reopening of King's Cross in London following the coronavirus lockdown, so the idea of the designer was to create something very joyful, «an anti-monument monument. It's ridiculously fun, over the top, camp»[3] (Ravenscroft 2021). Furman took inspiration from the recent queer history of the area, but also from the dramatic and decorative tradition of Victorian Age's monuments in public spaces.

"Boudoir Babylon" was designed in collaboration with Australian practice Sibling Architecture as part of the National Gallery of Victoria's NGV Triennial and creates various spaces for gathering: it «strategically divides the space to create areas for togetherness and solitude, for watching and being watched. In this way, it pays homage to three distinct spatial typologies – boudoirs, salons and clubs – which toe the line between public and private and have historically acted as safe spaces for marginalised groups in society» (Hahn 2020).

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[3]   As we can read on Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary online, camp aesthetics has always been connected to the queer world: «deliberately behaving in an exaggerated way that some people think is typical of a gay man», «having a style that is exaggerated and not in good taste, especially in a deliberately humorous way», <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/camp_3>.

Also this project celebrates queer and camp aesthetics, incorporating stereotypical colours (pink and blue) but re-contextualizing them and challenging traditional notions of binary genders, also thanks to the «queeroglyphs – symbols that playfully nod to different body parts and gender markers» but in ambiguous and non-binary way, as Furman explained (Hahn 2020).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, a reflection is proposed on the role of designers in all the concepts touched in this chapter. A shift must be fostered in mindset that implies the recognition of the concepts of subjectivities and Otherness in the design process: even though the topic of queer spaces has been studied by geographers, anthropologists, historians and other scholars in the field of queer social studies, still to be explored are the possible connections and possibilities of this link with Design Studies. However, the grounds are favourable, if we think of alterity and queerness as something that is not here yet but will have the possibility to be here in the future. That vision has a strong link with the very essence of designing: designers know well, since the very first day of university, that the word "project" comes from the Latin "pro iacere", to throw forward in time. To imagine possibilities and futures, to access something that is still not perceivable or accepted but that will eventually be. This philosophy of ideality and queer optimism is the one promulgated by Muñoz, who wrote: «Queerness is not here yet. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality... The future is queerness's domain» (Muñoz 2009: 1).

Citing Zingale, from his previous book about Design & Alterity: «Otherness is all that is not here yet, but yet has the possibility of being: what is not known or recognised, what is not accepted, what is discordant, what is not cognitively accessible. What is foreign but possible. It is Other that which is not yet part of our feeling and conceiving, but whose presence we can feel» (Zingale 2022: 21). This indefiniteness, ambiguity, openness to possibilities and fluidity around the concept of queerness may be perceived as something too vague that is not compatible with the act of designing. Instead, as Larochelle said, «while I agree with the notion that there is no

fixed queer space, I do think there are gestures that can be made to anticipate or design for the possibilities of queer use, or of use by a queer constituency»: investigating this is one of the main challenges. Also, experimenting with queer processes and methodologies, designing *with* queers or designing "queerly", instead of trying to design *for* queers, is one of the main challenges. Alterity, otherness, queerness are concepts that are already implicitly present in design when it offers services rather than consumable goods, produces actions of care rather than strategies of obtaining, invents artefacts capable of bringing out issues to reflect on rather than an aesthetics that encourages consumption, and also when a design method adopts dialogic and collaborative procedures, renouncing the advantage of authorship, says again Zingale (2022).

Design has not only the capabilities but also and mostly has the ethical responsibility to tackle issues related to inclusivity, coexistence, alterity, otherness, differences and queerness, since it influences the contexts, cities, places and, more generally, the entire World in which we live.

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Otherness Museums
Designing New Cultural Experiences
beyond Thematic and Cultural Borders

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to give a reading and a critical interpretation of the ways design-driven projects (in terms of approach and language instruments) stage themes and contents linked to the field of museography and exhibition design.

Here you will find the description of three case studies on cultural and context differences (*Storie Plurali – Plural Stories*, Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli – Ozzano Taro), on social fragility and discrimination (*Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* – Mexico City), and on differences connected to physical and mental health (*Museo Laboratorio della mente* – Roma), in which strengths and weaknesses are highlighted in order to investigate in what terms design becomes responsible, bearer and interpreter of paradigms and jargons designed to "represent" such a complex and articulated issue.

The key assumption is that a museum is a place where inside and outside do not exist as there is only a *through*; museums experience the same contradictions of the world they represent.

2. Otherness Museums

Any piece of heritage – be it ancient or contemporary, tangible or intangible – is handed down, told, given back, as an expression of a way of preserving, interpreting and communicating; it shows the difference among the many "worlds of meaning" and focuses on the dialogue process of representation, which takes shape in an active comparison of that which is handed down.

In the cultural experience of an exhibited "object" – or the content presented inside the museum – three different levels of meaning can be found. First, there are ideas, values, the purposes of the cultures from which the object comes. Second, there is the curator's interpretation. Finally, there

are the viewers' points of view with their personal legacy, knowledge and experiences. This complex stratification of meanings is added to the necessary abstraction that the object undergoes when it is decontextualized in order to be inserted in a museum space; this "distance" determines its *alterity*. The latter concept refers to the theory according to which the founding element of every piece of knowledge is the knowledge of the *difference* arising from the relationship that the subject establishes with the surrounding world (Lusini 2004). We should not forget that exhibiting any type of content in a museum means carrying out a decontextualization action; even more so when museums are about cultural identity, which is often stratified, complex and marked by migrations. In this type of museums, the "place" is the content that needs exhibiting. Here, by "place" we do not mean a definite space but rather, we are hinting the meaning given by Tuan (1977): a place is an entity built and rebuilt by the social representations of human beings, an entity communicating the social and relational life of the people that live – in various ways – in it. From this perspective, it is important to recognise that there is a dialectical relation between the concept of "place" and "space" (Relph 1976), just as dialectical and dialogic is the model of museum we tend to with the idea not only of showing the multifaceted identity of a culture but also of making people understand it through the interaction with the contents: triggering curiosity and questions, giving the possibility of expressing concepts and putting people in touch.

In this essay, the topic of alterity in museums takes two shapes: on the one hand, the problem of representation – representing migrant objects and stories in a strongly characterised territorial context, representing mental illness and the imagery connected to it, representing the identity of the culture of a people with all its migrations and multicultural stratifications –; on the other hand, offering an open and dialogic experience to museum-goers belonging to cultures which are different from the one narrated in the museum itself. In both cases, the aim is to translate and "stage" complexity. Exhibition design – together with the curator's project – takes responsibility for the activity of selection, translation and interpretation of messages that are proposed on different levels of museological and museographic narration. Which narrative structures? Which cultural experience models? Which language registers?

3. Plural Stories
Cultural Alterity – Temporal Alterity. "Migrant" Objects and Stories

Material culture is often represented by *identity objects*, i.e., particularly significant objects coming from the culture of a people which are capable of becoming intermediaries of traditions, rituals, symbology specific to a certain community. In this case, the curatorial and design project takes responsibility for the communication at different levels of meaning, accompanying "foreign" users into a world that is far from theirs, their culture and their social, historical, political experience.

In this study, the museum curatorial and design project aims at putting the historical object at the service of social inclusion. This is a double effort: bringing back to life the function of long-forgotten objects from a past time, and bringing its meaning beyond the country's borders.

The dizzying collection of objects from the 1900s rural and everyday culture floods the simple architecture of the *Museo del Quotidiano* – Museum of Everyday Objects – *Ettore Guatelli* (Ozzano Taro, Parma). Guatelli was interested in objects as a testament of the history of humankind, but he, was above all, fascinated by the infinite stories that each object preserves at a social, individual and territorial level.

This awareness and the willingness of this territorial museum to work on the leverage of intercultural integration have led to conceive the project "Plural Stories. The Museo Guatelli, oggetti e storie di vita" – objects and stories of life, developed within the European project *Map for ID* – Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue.[1] The project starts off from the objects hosted in the museum, from their identity and the narrative potential of each one of them, with the aim of building renewed stories through theatre workshops involving performers, writers, locals and immigrants. One of the rationales underlying the narration has its roots in the gestural memory around the object, which highlights both its material and immaterial value. Performance and narration intertwine in an interesting combination of past traditions and reinterpretations of the present. From a spatial point

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[1]   In 2008-2009, Museo Ettore Guatelli took part in *Map for ID – Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue,* within which it realised the itinerary/laboratory "Plural Stories. Il Museo Guatelli, oggetti e storie di vita". The initiative arose from the collaboration between Associazione Clio '92 and the Board of Directors of the *Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli*.

of view, each surface (walls, tables, stands) in the architectural space is densely occupied by the object landscape of the collector, so much so that it renders the geography of an era through detailed compositions (mostly by typology and shape), almost three-dimensional tattoos that erase the need of any possible additional set-up artefact and enable the visitor to plunge into a decorative chiasm where the ornament is simply a way for the multitude of objects to seize the space. If material features are implicitly narrated in this type of exhibition, the immaterial value of the objects comes to life starting with their dramatised narration, it becomes voice, gesture, performance, story, and – by enhancing the local identity – it goes beyond the geographical perimeter toward intercultural communication, generating migrant stories from the object to the territory.

The project is aimed at both methodological-strategic and operational implemental objectives:

– Activating intercultural dynamics in a difficult territorial context through literacy policies and by opening the museum to a "non-customary" public.
– Teaching adult migrants with no formal education to learn, interpret and conceptualise material and immaterial elements which take heritage value both with reference to the culture of origin and that of the place of residence.
– Encouraging the recipients (native and migrant women) to be aware of their and other people's cultural identity in an inclusive perspective and to consequently adopt a responsible behaviour in the civic context towards other individuals and the local heritage.
– Teaching the recipients to act in their workplaces as mediators for the museum heritage in an intercultural perspective.

The meetings focus on the recovery of the expertise and knowledge connected to the household and work dimension, and the identification of the objects and stories that come back from them, and which have represented the core of the workshop through a theatre experience. The narration project is based on the recovery of traditional stories that are then reinterpreted by the ten women involved (two Italians, eight foreigners) giving life to new stories linked with their places of origin. The theatre

paradigm – which historically comes from the act playing games – enabled a strong interaction among the people involved, as it is based on the sharing of gestures and performances triggered by stimuli and influences inspired by the objects exhibited in the museum itself.

The project ended with a theatre show curated by FestinaLente Teatro, "Plural Stories: from hand to hand", in which the women performed their stories through a verbal and gestural language aimed at engaging the public.[2] The positive outcomes of the project can be summarised in three levels of intervention which focus on the museum as the "new" place of cultural mediation:

– *Open culture museum:* the encounter among people from different cultural contexts generating a new opening to the territorial context of reference.
– *Social Network Museum:* the activation of the relationship between subjects and realities until then unfamiliar to the life of the museum (local administrations, cultural associations, theatres…) with the aim of starting collaborations for future projects.
– *"Relay" museum:* the idea is to create a virtuous cycle where the women involved can, in their turn, become guardians of new knowledge and start new initiatives as cultural mediators; for instance, they could guide tours with an intercultural taste addressed to local communities (not only for people of foreign origin but also for locals).

4. *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia*
Social Alterity. Difference, Memory and Inclusion

Social responsibility should be one of the main objectives of a museum. In an era – such as the contemporary one – where we put the focus on human connections and social ties, it is no longer sufficient to guarantee the preservation and exhibition of collections, but it is all the more urgent to make relationships easier and trigger discussion and participation.

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[2]   <http://www.comune.torino.it/museiscuola/esperienze/migranti/2009-fondazione-museo-et-tore-guatelli-ozzano-taro-.shtml>.

Obviously, this aspect is now more than present, even in digital museums. This is the case of the blog *The Incluseum* which advances new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building and collaborative practices related to inclusion in museums; it is also the case of *Museums, Politics and Power,* which aims to promote and disseminate conferences, workshops and roundtables on these topics; and of *Social Justice Alliance of Museums*, developed thanks to the intuition of the National Museums of Liverpool. The Alliance promotes the dissemination of collective equity, encouraging at different levels including through the emancipation and full involvement of local communities (Ciaccheri 2015). It was created out of the growing recognition of the importance of social value of museums and its impact on the public. The aim of this museum network is to find a collective voice and promote social impact of museums, exchange knowledge and work together on joint initiatives.

Museums are questioning themselves on their ethical role by taking up a prospective and complex vision in the attempt of putting themselves at the centre of the current social debate. Offering cultural programs of a certain type means entering the social and cultural debate taking on responsibilities, even of a political nature. Museums – with their collections – offer a form of narration and representation of a certain model of reality albeit through an artist's eyes – in the case of art museums – or through specific technical, historical and critical points of views – in the case of science, technology and anthropological museums. Therefore, questioning oneself on the meaning and effect of these narrations and representations is fundamental, as well as defining the explicit contextualization of the curator's choices.

The *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* certainly intends to be a place of reflection, discussion, and friction with reference to socially crucial topics. The wing of the museum devoted to *memory* tells the social political story of some of the peoples involved in wars and subjected to genocides and deportation (Armenia, Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Guatemala, Darfur); while the one devoted to *tolerance* tackles current problems connected to many types of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices; the female condition, diversity and inclusion, with a focus on the Mexican people and the civil rights codified in this context. Here the concept of alterity is present in each of these themes, precisely because the value of tolerance is based on the acceptance of diversity.

The goals of the museum involve different strategic levels:

– Inviting new generations to a healthy and balanced coexistence in the context where they live.
– Offering visitors an opportunity for debate in order to invite them to introspection and questioning possible discriminating and pre-conceptual attitudes.
– Raising awareness of the condition of the most fragile categories.
– Promoting the value of respect and tolerance.

In this case, the museum offers a narration implying curatorial and design work carried out in extreme synergy. Indeed, the setting is built mostly with multimedia materials and interactive devices envisaging different types of use: in particular, the users are immersed in collective and personal stories; they are asked to question themselves on issues presuming social friction, to express their position through interactive systems. In cases such as this one, exhibition design is both the mediator of participation processes and that which formalises the set-up devices aimed at giving voice to the curatorial system.

5. *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* (*Mind Workshop Museum*) Mental Alterity. Experiences and stories on the margin

Its ethical and social role assumes that the museum is a bearer of stories and not a container of collections. When the stories are about life, suffering, mental illness, the narration of the exhibition not only has the task of illustrating a content, but also has that – more difficult – of empathically communicating intangible features. This is the task of narration museums (Cirifino F., Giardina Papa et al. 2011): "staging" the intangible features of a topic, be it historical, social or monographic.
Here below we will describe a particularly significant case: the *Mind Workshop Museum*[3] (designed by Studio Azzurro). It is a space especially conceived and realised to be experiential and performance-oriented, with the aim to document the history of mental hospitals and elaborate a constant

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3   <https://www.museodellamente.it/museo-laboratorio-della-mente/>.

reflection on the health/illness paradigm, alterity, social inclusion, treatment and culture politics and the engagement of communities.

This museum looks back at the history of Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, from its foundation as a hospital for needy foreigners and mentally ill people up to its final closure after about 500 years of activity as a mental hospital. In the scenario of the exhibition itinerary, the visitor's body becomes the privileged and active means for understanding the minor and often forgotten stories, events and transformations of these places intended for treating mental illness, as well as the history and relationships inscribed in them.

The centrality of the body in the interpretation of mental illness is developed through physical places created and built around the physical and psychic conditions of mental illness and the "ways of feeling" of the mentally ill: speaking to the wall, face expressions, the closed posture of the body and some behaviours such as swinging, pointing the elbows on the table, the hands on the ears, the head bent and the eyes lowered and looking inside.

The itinerary is organised as a sensory narrative in which the content (tangible and intangible) and its setting appear as a single entity. The narrative starts with the section "Entering Outside, Exiting Inside", a sort of oxymoron which immediately puts visitors before the tragedy experienced by the patients committed because of their way of looking and their actions. A set of eyes observe those who come in: it is a slow and relentless series of photos of patients whose visual horizon is a further threshold beyond the physical one, is a personal, private threshold. The feeling of being scrutinised by the eyes of the patients reverses the relation between the object and the subject of the narrative, thus generating a comparison that is repeatedly undermined throughout the itinerary. Here we have a sort of "mirrored perception" of diversity. The paradigm of the threshold continues with a plexiglass wall along the entire space which opens on the various rooms suggesting the theme of the interior and the exterior, defining a limit, a division and isolation. A wall, an invisible and unbreakable surface, receives the heaviness of the bodies (video projected figures) which bang on it with strength and desperation, making the visitor aware of the vibration of this violence.

The second section *Ways of Feeling* is devoted to the sensations, the different emotivity of the patients. Here the theme of perception is tackled from two different angles: perception as altered by cultural schemes that

persist in time and perception as induced by a shared sense bordering the absurd, which is made explicit in three connected rooms. There is also an Ames room, (named after the 18th-century ophthalmologist), which offers a distorted vision obtained through an optical trick. This visual experience proves the importance and the danger of stereotypes (a central element in the design of the experience of alterity). The *Ways of Feeling* are interpreted in three ways:

– *Talking:* here the stereotype of "talking loudly" is staged through a trick with microphones (before which visitors are invited to express themselves) and out-of-synch video projections which makes it difficult to watch and listen at the same time, producing a sort of dissociation representing a torment that also comes back elsewhere in the itinerary.
– *Seeing:* the installation is a mirror which cuts the visitors' face into two parts. The left half is really mirrored, while the right half is the projection of a time-delayed video that makes it different from how it actually is. The possibility of looking in the mirror is therefore denied, but also those who observe it perceive a coexistent diversity, a being here and elsewhere, which, according to a shared opinion, is one of the features of mental illness.
– *Listening:* the third room features a series of funnels suspended on the heads of the visitors. The funnel on the head is a recurring image in the representation of mental illness, the very Hieronymus Bosch in one of his famous paintings introduces this element both to depict madness and to represent those who treat it. As the visitor passes under these electronical funnels, almost wearing them as hats, voices are activated by sensors, among which the visitor can easily to recognise their own as recorded in the previous *Talking* room: meaningless sentences uttered to activate the narrating mouth. A mixture of fragmented and repeated voices, which crowd, like in a nightmare, over the heads of the visitors.

In the *Portrays* section, the common sense that looks at the "outsider" is no longer present and it is replaced, on the one hand, by the expert and loving glance of a wise doctor and, on the other hand, by the mechanic and hostile eye of a camera through which one can observe and meditate on the illness of others. The wise doctor is Romolo Righetti, who observed his patients at

Santa Maria della Pietà with an eye that was outside the logics of science or the Lombrosian classification; in 1930s, he made 25 portraits depicting his patients. In contrast with this is the merciless eye of the camera, an historical device, by which the visitor can be portrayed after having written their name on a small board behind a chair, as in 1900s mug shots. The image is stored in a digital medical record and will be transformed into a pathological version, together with the images of other visitors or those retrieved from the patient archive.

The narration continues by focusing on the body of the visitor. In the section *Dwellings of the Body* the visitor is called on to take certain postures and make certain movements to convey the power of meaning: swaying, the elbows resting on a table, the hands on the ears, bending the head, the eyes looking down; all these attitudes communicate inner distress.

From the body to the mind: in the section *Inventors of Worlds,* we enter the imagery of two patients who – although inside a restrictive facility – manage to find their universe, which is shown in a highly poetical and sometimes even prophetical vision.

In the section *Closed Institution* we go from imaginary worlds to the harsh reality of institutions: the visit ends with three rooms in a row which one can see through a glass. They are reconstructions that tell us about the cruelty and harsh reality of reclusion. Here, observing real elements and spaces, re-elaborated and set up through minimal interpretations, transforms these rooms into sites of the memory: the wardrobe, the doctor's office, the restraint chamber, the pharmacy... places reverberating the stories experiences in the itinerary, which finally become clear to the visitor.

The museum narration ends with a change, a subversion of things, objects, furniture... This is the change introduced by Law 180, which ordered the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the regulation of commitment and forced treatment: a crucial transformation at both the medical and the social level. What makes the case of this museum emblematic is the synergy between a museological and museographic project. The intention of setting up an experience and the responsibility of conveying to visitors – even physically – the outcome of a type of content where the perception of alterity is fundamental, are at the core of the process of understanding the whole narration.

6. Conclusion

The social role of museums increasingly opens up to new forms of use and cultural experience. While the latter case study tells the social history of mental illness in a symmetrical way, other museums temporarily become "bearers of mental treatment". In 2018, many Canadian, English and Belgian studies in the medical field showed the function of museums a form of therapy that improves the psychological and physical conditions of people and relieve stress. This trend (together with the need of funding) is leading to redesigning multifunctional spaces in museum facilities, in order to have more rooms available for shared activities aimed at creating well-being.

To confirm this, one may quote an experimental project that is in place in two museums in Milan, the *Museum of Natural History* and the *Gallery of Modern Art*. The project is named *ASBA* (Anxiety, Stress, Brain-friendly museum, Approach), designed and coordinated by The Study Center on the History of Biomedical Thought (CESPEB) of University Milano-Bicocca. It is an interdisciplinary program based on the idea of promoting museum collections and imagining museums as spaces of choice where collective well-being is stimulated through forms of art therapy, Visual Thinking Strategies and Art Up. Therefore, museums are now also intended as social and emotional spaces where the dialogue between art and science is at the service of the community of "new" users and generates new forms of cultural experience.

The new paradigms of use envisage museums also as rehabilitation facilities or – in the most extreme cases – as shelters. In any case, after preservation and exhibition, the main function of contemporary museums is research, mainly research on social transformation. Indeed, it is on this theme that museums are investing, to understand the challenge in terms of "designing for alterity": first of all, trying to understand what is meant by *identity*, *alterity*, *diversity* (cultural, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability...) as new forms of representation and interpretation, but first and foremost, how can museums be the mirrors of societal change through research, heritage updating and education?[4] It is necessary for museums to

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[4] The educational project Museums and Social Transformations (September-November 2023) curated by Maria Chiara Ciaccheri, Anna Chiara Cimoli and Nicole Moolhuijsen, in collaboration with Viviana Gravano, aimed at tackling different features of social transformation in three modules: *Decolonilizing the vision; Fluidi Museums. Interpreting gender diversity and sexuality through the Cultural Heritage; Projecting a strategy for Accessibilty.*

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become bearers of new research and analysis methodologies and to use them to create a network that helps facing the challenges of social change, going beyond the simple display of collection. For sure, overcoming stereotypes and fostering accessibility (at many levels) are crucial issues for which new tools and forms of design are needed.

Finally, this new vocation is well represented by the study cases examined in this paper: these museum models and their cultural experiences show three different approaches to using narration as a tool to "shorten distances" in the understanding of issues that are something "other" from the user's comfort zone. These narrations use the *dialogical creative dimension* of workshops ("Plural Stories", *Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli*); the *interrogative interactive dimension* triggered by multimedia devices offering "frictions" that help change one's point of view (*Museo Memoria y Tolerancia*); the *performance dimension* which can provoke in visitors a feeling of displacement, disturbance, identification (*Museum Workshop of the Mind*).

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Life is AI Cabaret
Queering Alterity through Dataset Curation[*]

1. Entering the first deepfake drag-act

The foundation of the following pages, as well as the theoretical object under consideration, revolves around the artistic platform <www.zizi.ai>, designed by Jake Elwes. Once entered *The Zizi Show* (the precise title of the artwork), we are immediately welcomed by an auditory landscape intertwined with the soundtrack from Bob Fosse's iconic cinematic creation, *Cabaret*. This sonic backdrop is thoughtfully paired with a captivating voice-over, enticing our active engagement in an extraordinary spectacle: the first deepfake drag-act. However, a fundamental question arises: what precisely does this encompass?

As soon as we commence our interaction with the platform, we witness a fluid transformation of drag performances through artificial agents: digital embodiments undergo continuous transitions, evolving into captivating performances that unveil a customized drag experience unfurling upon a virtual stage. After being welcomed, the host of the show, transformed by the use of deepfake technology into a constantly mutable entity, provides us with the necessary tools to initiate the experience. From performer to performance, the platform empowers users to tailor the show letting the spotlight falls on the normativity governing artificial intelligence when recognizing and reproducing human identity. Indeed, central in *The Zizi Show* is the focus on the deficiency in diversity that persists within the training datasets harnessed by neural networks during the developmental phases of a wide array of artificial intelligence computational models.

A pivotal endeavour of the artistic project is thus to squarely address this crucial void by using a peculiar non-human agent: the deepfake.

In the digital age we currently live, the proliferation of AI-based technologies has given rise to new and intricate phenomena within the media landscape. Among these, deepfakes stand as a remarkable illustration of the synergy between artificial intelligence and the manipulation of data extractable from images and videos. Within this perspective, the term 'deepfake' represents a neologism that signifies an audiovisual artefact resulting from the automated alteration of images, crafted through deep neural networks, with the intent of imbuing them with an aura of authenticity. These media artefacts closely approximate the visual attributes of images designed to appear photographic, employing an indexical, spatiotemporal connection. To achieve this, deepfake technology relies on multiple layers of artificial neurons in order to acquire and replicate intricate patterns within datasets. The term 'deep' conveys the inherent complexity of the computational architectures utilized, enabling neural networks to progressively acquire the ability to simulate representations. This elevated level of complexity plays a pivotal role in processing images and videos, as it facilitates capturing and replicating the nuanced visual subtleties that discern authentic content. A distinctive hallmark of deepfakes is, hence, their capacity to manipulate visual data, potentially leading viewers to believe that synthetically produced material is genuinely authentic. These neural networks intricately acquire visual details, encompassing expressive gestures and nuanced features of objects or individuals undergoing replication, thus equipping them to generate content that closely approximates reality.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that, although the intention may appear to be grounded in deception, no inherent obstacle exists to the production of deepfakes that are openly and distinctly contrived. These are deepfakes wherein their artificial essence can be concretely manifested and reified. This particular scenario is tangibly exemplified in the case of *The Zizi Show* and its act of curating datasets within a performative[1] framework. Subsequently, in the ensuing discussion I will undertake an analysis

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[1] It appears crucial to emphasize the dual reflection on performativity, the near aporia, flowing through the project. In *The Zizi Show* performance undoubtedly pertains to the gender aspect of cabaret, while simultaneously addressing the gender dimension of identity performance.

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of the artistic project, approaching it from multiple standpoints. This will involve employing a semiotic framework, which is attuned to comprehending alterity within our posthuman environment (Braidotti 2019; Ferrando 2019). Additionally, a design perspective will be incorporated, with creativity (Munari 1971; Deni 2016) as its core methodology for addressing ethical and social concerns. This analysis will encompass an exploration of the concepts of enunciation and subjectivation, investigating how their dynamics undergo transformations in our contemporary context.

2. Designing alterity through the dataset

A prevailing common thread interwoven throughout drag performances, including our pioneering deepfake endeavour, lies in the embodiment of corporeal rebellion and the deliberate design of its mutability. This defines the constraints normalized by a gender identity logic fixated on categorizing bodies within a binary and oppositional schema. The drag performance itself functions as a potent vehicle for transcending the confines of that normativity, manifesting through the choreography of bodies, the exploration of roles, the deconstruction of genders, and the unfettered expression of desires that subvert the dichotomous portrayal of gender binarism. Throughout the performances, the inherent contrivance of normative discourse can be spotlighted when addressing the binary pattern of gender identity.

Judith Butler (1990), who embarked on a seminal exploration of drag performances as a theoretical subject within their philosophy, eloquently characterizes this phenomenon as an exposure to vulnerability – a recognition of dispensability that simultaneously carries a subversive potency. Upon severing ties with the notion that private existence can be demarcated from interdependency and reciprocities, Butler's insight resonates: our bodies, by their discourse, inevitably stand as open and exposed entities. Consequently, individual subjective lives become intertwined with the broader tapestry of cultural, political, economic and, of course, technological agents. Negotiating within this intricate web, individual lives artfully tread the delicate equilibrium to secure politics of recognition (Chun 2021). Yet, this overarching openness can only be attained through the acknowledgement of a profound interdependence that envelops the very essence of life itself. This recognition compels us to assume the manifold

responsibilities intrinsic to this openness. Echoing Butler's paradigm, a question arises: how does one navigate this openness within a world progressively undergoing a re-ontologization (Floridi 2022), wherein the fabric of existence is progressively ensconced in data to empower the multifarious tasks executed by artificial intelligence?

In the quest to address this enquiry, I advocate for a thorough exploration of the concept of designing alterity within the realm of artificial intelligence and machine learning. This concept should be regarded as a central focal point for projects that revolve around contemporary data-driven technologies. Therefore, designing alterity refers to the intentional construction and inclusion of diverse and nonconventional perspectives, identities and characteristics within datasets to challenge normative paradigms and amplify underrepresented voices. This concept signifies an intentional departure from conventional data collection practices that often perpetuate biases and reinforce prevailing stereotypes.

Curating datasets, as a preparatory step for training machine learning models, becomes a powerful tool for constructing and enhancing a more equitable AI. The process can involve meticulous selection and inclusion of a wide range of data points that represent varying dimensions of human experiences and identities. This curation transcends the superficial level of diversity by seeking to incorporate data that embody the intricacies of the world in which we live.

Within this perspective, it is pertinent to consider a range of transformations that can be activated through the curatorial process of dataset development. This process can:

– *Challenge bias and stereotypes*. The curation of datasets to encompass diverse demographics, cultures and identities inherently confronts the biases and stereotypes that often pervade existing datasets. This incorporation of a broader spectrum of perspectives equips resulting models to offer a more refined and inclusive comprehension of intricate issues;
– *Promote fairness and equity*. The deliberate emphasis on alterity during dataset curation strives to address issues of fairness and equity. By incorporating a representation of diverse experiences while minimizing biases, technologies stemming from such datasets are better poised to cater to a wide array of user groups reducing discriminatory tendencies; and finally

- *Empower underrepresented communities*. The act of deliberately designing for alterity serves to empower underrepresented communities by acknowledging and valuing their experiences. This inclusivity can subsequently lead to increased visibility, recognition and representation within AI-driven applications, thereby bridging existing gaps in representation.

By delving into these transformations, projects such as *The Zizi Show* can uncover the profound potential of curating datasets with an alterity-driven focus, reaching beyond epistemic limitations and enabling AI technologies to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive landscape. Designing alterity through datasets serves thus as a pivotal avenue for enhancing the inclusivity, fairness and accuracy of AI and machine learning technologies. Directing attention towards the curatorial dimension of datasets allows us to broaden our perspective on the collection of data and the epistemologies that traverse them.

Conceptualizing the design of a dataset in curatorial terms (Cáceres Barbosa and Voto 2021) enables us to consider the continuum (Jo and Gebru 2020) that exists between archives as repositories of socio-cultural data and datasets as clusters of information stored for artificial intelligence comprehension (Voto 2022). From a semiotic standpoint, the act of archiving always involves a process of re-enunciation by using a specific medium that preserves data and stores information, thereby becoming an enduring reminder. However, this process is always bound by its limits and thus necessitates a complementary element that simultaneously serves as a mnemonic and informative one. This supplementary aspect proposes both a technique for data compilation and a technology for the annotation process. Throughout this viewpoint, the informative fallacy of the archive (Acebal, Guerri and Voto 2020) comes into play: beyond its role as a repository, each archive generates knowledge and exerts performative consequences on the ways in which it informs and recalls. This dynamic interaction underscores the reciprocal relationship between information storage and the generation of knowledge within archival contexts.

3. Rendering alterity opaque through curated datasets

As articulated by Umberto Eco in his work *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), semiotics serves as the discipline dedicated to the study of all that can be em-

ployed for deception. This foundational principle underscores the utility of resorting to the discipline within today's digital iconosphere, as it aids in unravelling the nuanced implications that can be attributed to a visual fabrication. It is not a stretch to recognize that, throughout the course of human history, the manipulation of representations has been a recurring phenomenon, inciting a reciprocal cognitive interaction between the realms of fiction and perception. Similarly, it is evident that in our contemporary landscape we confront a visual culture in which falsifications and counterfeits are influenced by intentionality that transcends the realm of the human. Within this context, the presence of artificial agents, such as deepfake technology, operates to enunciate reality in a transparent manner. In the words of the art critic and semiotician Luis Marin (1989), this enunciation generates an effect of reality,[2] albeit one in which the material essence is significantly diminished.

One of the key concepts upon which semiotics has been built is that of enunciation, which serves as the instance of mediation between the language – *langue*, intended as a language even beyond the verbal one –, in its capacity as a collective repository, and the speech – *parole* –, as its concrete realization. In this context, the drag deepfake performances presented by *The Zizi Show* can be understood as practices of enunciation of alterity. These performances highlight the inherent tension in which identities are embodied – a tension that arises between the repository of collective writings and expectations concerning the enactment of gender identity on

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[2]   The concept of "effect of reality" encompasses both the negotiation of ingrained habits and the interaction with stimuli. Since we have become accustomed to this notion of reality, it appears genuine and, simultaneously, it engages with the physiological aspects of human perception. It is within this negotiation that synthetic technologies, giving rise to deepfake, find their place: deepfake engage in a dialogue with the Western visual culture, generating reality effects that seem plausible to our visual senses. Yet, they introduce a subtle nuance of meaning: deepfakes utilize an array of tools to veil their artificiality. This concealment, however, carries implications, especially concerning the horizons of representation and access to contemporary visual culture. Technological advancements have equipped artificial intelligence with the ability to generate images from scratch, thanks to the proliferation of machine learning and generative adversarial networks. This capacity is marked by a potent and nearly imperceptible suspension of disbelief. However, it is evident that machine learning erodes many beliefs associated with artificial intelligence, as it has a propensity to reinforce and perpetuate social biases. This renders the technology neither entirely artificial nor genuinely intelligent (Crawford 2021). In light of these concerns, a significant drawback of these technologies is their reliance on data, wherein the training set might inadvertently replicate human values and biopolitical constraints. Consequently, the collection of data frequently ends up reifying hegemonic power structures.

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one hand and the tangible, individual performances on the other. In effect, these practices act as a medium of mediation between these layers. Furthermore, following the work of Marin on visual enunciation (1989), it is possible to distinguish between transparency and opacity in enunciation, which is the difference between representation and its displaying. An image can show itself transitively, in a transparent enunciation, when representing something; but it can also display a reflexive manifestation, in an opaque enunciation, when presenting a representation that reflects upon its own composition, its materiality.

The enunciative process undoubtedly encompasses the involvement of both human and non-human agents, resulting in a dynamic interplay that resonates within our posthuman ecosystem. Positioned as intermediaries between the expressions of identity performances and the socio-cultural foundations of identification, the process of subjectivation also engages with the construction of meaning and its subsequent incorporation into patterns. The enunciative praxis of subjectivity, therefore, constitutes the level at which the issue of gender power dynamics, as well as the gender agency within its environment, can be addressed. Therefore, this level of analysis can also questions the formation of social meaning and the manner in which it becomes a habit, to use the vocabulary of Charles S. Peirce, consequently fostering a predisposition to action. The collective set of habits governing gender dynamics, permeating discourses and language, seamlessly influences our actions without undergoing interrogation or critical examination, ultimately regulating our behaviours and attitudes – a form of conditioning denoted by Teresa De Lauretis (1984) as "experience".[3] In essence, the enunciative praxis of subjectivity underscores the nature through which social sense-making occurs and how these habits,

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[3]   As defined by de Lauretis in her *Alice Doesn't*, experience is: «the general sense of a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations-material, economic, and interpersonal-which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction-which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world» (1984: 159).

originating from the gendered realm, become embedded within our actions. This concept prompts an interrogation of the unexamined societal constructs that underpin our behaviours and shape our identities, as well as highlighting the influence of such constructs on the formation of individual and collective experiences such as, for instance, the discourses on technologies.

Nowadays, a widespread, albeit somewhat dystopian, perception of artificial intelligence as a vehicle of transparent enunciation exists. In contrast, the work of Jake Elwes advocates for an exuberant opacity, a form of opacity that challenges the conventional enunciation of gender identity. The performances designed in *The Zizi Show* have been meticulously crafted to visualize and embody the visual rhetoric of identification, thereby altering it within the automated framework of our data culture. To achieve this, the project meticulously curates the opacity of the dataset encompassing facial and bodily images, which includes a diverse array of portraits depicting drag personas. This curatorial effort serves as a catalyst, sparking a profound transformation within the underlying weights of the neural network. The neural network's internal weights thus diverge from the entrenched norms that have been shaped by conventional training datasets, which often adhere to a binary gender framework. By deviating from this established norm, the neural network utilized in the design of drag performances within *The Zizi Show* embarks on an uncharted exploration that gravitates toward the expansive and multifaceted realm of queerness. Through this opaque trajectory of divergence, the neural network showcases its capacity to transcend the confines of normativity in identity representation, embracing a paradigm characterized by fluidity, nonconformity and a broad spectrum of gender identities.

Sensitized by this curated gesture of opacity, the neural network undergoes a profound recalibration of its interpretive framework. As a result, it gains the capability to authentically encapsulate, reproduce and even amplify the nuanced features that define the enunciation of drag subjectivity. This reconfiguration testifies to the transformative potential embedded within the infusion of diversity into training datasets, further advancing the trajectory towards AI models that mirror and celebrate the intricate tapestry of posthumanity.

4. Placing alterity in the latency of the dataset

It is within the latent space – an abstract mathematical representation of detected features within the training data of the neural network – where the recalibration of the dataset occurs. This space enables the generation of artificial images from multiple data points, each containing informative features. Deep neural networks possess the capacity to discern underlying patterns within data, which can be further explored by crafting algorithms to delve into the latent potentialities of learnt distributions. This undertaking yields original instances of data creation devoid of design rules, yet retaining a distinctive semblance of reality.

In this perspective, the latent space serves as a spatial dimension where the transformation of an image from potentiality to actuality becomes feasible. It resides within the virtual realm of creativity, delineating the coordinates of all conceivable outputs. Similar to how a generative grammar of language transcends limitations to a set of utterances, the latent space shares this generative characteristic: it is not a repository, but rather a spatial domain characterized by a hierarchical strategy to dissect any given input. The analytical process initiates with elementary features such as edges and angles, progressively advancing towards more sophisticated ones like noses and eyes. Essentially, the latent space represents the highest-level conceptual compression of input data, standing as the penultimate step before the neural network's final output. Nonetheless, this spatial dimension remains elusive to human perception due to its intricate nature, typical neural network latent spaces exist as hyperspheres with approximately 100 dimensions.

Throughout the training process of a neural network, the latent space is designed, narrowing the realm of potentialities and subsequently enhancing the relevance of visual patterns. A narrower latent space reproduces the input, while an excessively wide one generates nonsensical outputs. In the creation of deepfake drag performances for *The Zizi Show*, deliberate constraints were applied to the latent space of an existing neural network for facial recognition. The network had been trained on a predominantly homogeneous dataset with a notable Western bias. To challenge gender constructs and explore the significance of facial features in reproducing gender identities, the latent space was enriched with a thousand images of drag personas. This augmentation prompted the network to generate

exaggerated and discordant facial features and body forms. The outcome assumes an opaque quality, materializing the ever-evolving exaggeration of the face, apt at highlighting the intersection between gender and genre as a performative mechanism of identity.

The opacity within the latent space of the dataset employed in *The Zizi Show* facilitated a transformation within facial and bodily representations that do not exist in the physical world or the virtual domain. By rendering the latent space of the dataset reified, the project establishes a foundation for reevaluating the entrenched patterns that dictate the significance of gender identification in facial perception within the era of deepfakes. This raises the last question: is there truly a minimal visual pattern that signifies a gender identity when projected onto a face?

5. Towards conclusions

Deepfake technology is emerging as a significant advancement aimed at addressing a prevailing concern in contemporary societies: the concept of disembodied identities, where visual and textual representations of individuals circulate independently of their physical presence. This phenomenon has its origins well before the advent of audiovisual media and electronic databases, with the circulation of such depictions laying the foundation for certain human identities to detach from their physical embodiment. The nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of novel communication technologies like telegraphy, photography, telephony and the phonograph, which brought new mediated forms to these representations. This amplification led to an eerie phenomenon of omnipresent non-physical replicas permeating society, distinct from their human counterparts. It is in this context that, in 1886, Frederic Myers of the *British Society for Psychical Research* introduced the term "phantasms of the living" to describe the proliferation of these humanoid duplicates (Gates 2011).

While we have grown accustomed to these phantasms' presence and their roles in representation within our lives, the era of computerization has sparked a resurgence in their quantity, manifestations and applications. This resurgence has intensified the challenge of re-embodying these depictions within society. In the pursuit of reuniting disembodied identities, artefacts like standardized documents, archives and administrative procedures for managing individual identities have supplanted the more per-

sonal and informal trust and recognition inherent in smaller-scale social structures. But how to re-embody a deepfake?

The investigation into *The Zizi Show* and its intricate interplay involving the curation of datasets and the performative enunciation of subjectivity has demonstrated an intention to formulate a design methodology aimed at the re-embodiment of alterity within the context of algorithmic reproducibility. By analysing this project through diverse lenses, we have unveiled how semiotic insights and design perspectives intersect, providing a proposal for designing alterity into the evolving landscape of posthuman creativity. Employing creativity as a catalyst for addressing ethical and social concerns underscores the project's significance in prompting critical discussions at the juncture of art and technology. Through an examination of enunciation and subjectivation, we have demonstrated how these concepts morph within the context of our ever-changing contemporary milieu. In the end, *The Zizi Show* stands as a testament to the potency of design exploration in skilfully navigating the intricate nexus of identities, realities and perceptions within the dynamic landscape of the contemporary world.

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Embracing an "Idiotic" Approach to Design for a "complex we"
The Case of the Nolo Situated Vocabulary

1. Introduction

Sometimes, the context in which we design urges us to question our work and reconsider our design practices from a different perspective, reimagining the epistemological framework from which we design. Particularly, many of us are currently experiencing the limitations of a Western-centric, dichotomous approach, envisioning individuals separated from what is *other,* that ends up generating polarisation and social/environmental injustices. To foster a regenerative (Escobar 2018), de-colonized (Mignolo 2018; Quijano 2000), non-patriarchal (Lugones 2020; Hooks 2000) ecosystemic and more just design within a situated context (Haraway 1988), recognizing that *I* could not simply exist without the *other* (being it other humans but also non humans), it is essential to first interrogate the epistemological framework that underlies our design practices. Based on the experience of a concrete case study, the aim of this work is to explore what it might concretely mean to make design (and particularly participatory design) less anthropocentric and Western-centric, acknowledging how we actually inter-depend from what is perceived as *other* and who actually participates in bottom-up forms of "politics of the everyday" (Manzini 2015).

Who is typically excluded from these collaborative participatory processes, and how can we include them? Besides marginalised human communities, which silent actors (Plumwood 2002), like plants and insects, resist being included, and need translation/representation? What are the inherent limitations of these translation/representation processes? Our experimentation highlights the need to carefully navigate the negotiation process among all actors involved, acknowledging their intricate interdependencies, in order to unravel how they are fundamentally interdependent on each other (Escobar 2018).

2. Theoretical Framing

2.1. *Designing from the Cosmopolitical Proposal*

The Anthropocene,[1] a concept based on Eurocentric dichotomous thinking polarising identity and alterity, which designers have often contributed to shaping (Fry 2020), has notoriously not only environmental consequences but also social ones (Latour 2018). While the potential contribution of more traditional forms of design to this "de-futuring" process (Fry 2020) may be rather evident, the (political) responsibility in the context of designing for participation is less clear. Although participatory design processes aim to enhance the common good and foster a more just and sustainable society, they often fail to grasp the complexity of the entanglements among humans and beyond.[2] As a result, they often inadequately address the intricate environmental and social issues emerging from these entanglements. How can we move beyond anthropo- and Western-centrism? How can we ensure that our designs for participation transcend this dichotomous, polarising epistemological framework and genuinely listen to other voices and worldings? How can we embrace *other* worldings inhabiting the situated context in which we operate? In other words, how can these *other* human and non-human worldings help us to reframe our work in more relational ways? How to embrace ideas of relationality coming from *other* publics?

When re-framing the politics of design in cosmopolitical terms (Huybrechts, Devisch, and Tassinari 2022), we seek here to reinterpret Hannah Arendt's notion of democracy – which, in design terms, can be understood as participatory discussions/actions for the common good (Tassinari and Staszowski 2020) – in light of contemporary sensibilities that push us toward a less anthropocentric (Latour 2017; Stengers 1997) and less Western-centric gaze, "de-linking" (Mignolo 2018; Vasquez-Fernandez et al. 2018) from the Modern/Colonial (Mignolo 2018; Quijano 2000) episteme from which design as a discipline originated (Fry 2020).

When discussing the politics of design,[3] we refer to the political responsibil-

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[1] Braidotti and Hlavajova (2018); Crutzen and Stoermer (2000); Edwards (2015).
[2] Akama, Light, and Kamihira (2020); Forlano (2017); Gatto and McCardle (2019); Veselova and Gaziulusoy (2021); Von Essen and Allen (2017).
[3] Huybrechts, Devisch, and Tassinari (2022); DiSalvo (2009).

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ity of designers in enabling citizens to play a more active role in society.[4] One approach involves creating contexts or "agoras"[5] fostering conversations to identify "common interests" (Arendt 1958; Huybrechts et al. 2018). Hannah Arendt's philosophy allows us to reconnect the notion of interests to its etymological origin – interests as "inter-esse" (Arendt 1958), that which lies between "us" and binds "us" together – recognizing interdependence as its foundation. However, we are gradually realising that we need to reconceptualize this political agency in less anthropo- and Western-centric terms, expanding this understanding of common interests. It is not only about what lies between "us" but also about what the "us" itself represents.

In this regard, anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena's (2019) concept of the "complex we" is enlightening. In her fieldwork with Mariano and Nazario Turpo, two Andean Quechua peasants, she explores ways to navigate the incommensurability of the other with oneself and oneself with the other, leading to the idea that "we" is always a "complex togetherness" (de la Cadena 2021). This "complex we" encompasses incommensurability and embraces a "not knowing" (*ibidem*) that is inherently linked to every act of knowing. Unlike the simple "we", the "complex we" encompasses what goes beyond the usual understanding of "we": i.e. the other and all its incommensurability, including *other* worldings (human as well as non-human). Achieving this requires an alternative epistemological framework that acknowledges the possibility that "not knowing" is actually the only secure ground.

But what would it mean to reconsider Arendt's notion of the *in-between* in light of the ontological turn? How can we navigate what lies between the "complex we", which necessitates confronting the act of "not knowing"? Here, Isabelle Stengers' "cosmopolitical proposal" (2005) can assist us in rethinking Arendt's politics of the *in-between* through this renewed sensitivity. The cosmopolitical proposal encompasses a reframing of politics from the perspective of a "complex we" and its inherent incommensurability, encouraging us to expand Arendt's understanding of politics – particularly democracy – in cosmopolitical terms. While Arendt's proposal

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4   Akama, Light, and Kamihira (2020); Binder et al. (2015); DiSalvo (2010); Forlano (2017); Manzini (2015); Thorpe and Rhodes (2018); White (2019).

5   Arendt (1958); Tassinari, Piredda, and Bertolotti (2017).

moves from "Man to Men" (Arendt 1958), emphasising the plurality inherent in being human, Stengers assists us in the delicate transition from Men to the "complex we" par excellence: Gaia, where the planet Earth is not merely the "reign of Man" but a "living planet". The cosmopolitical proposal invites us to reconsider politics from the perspective of Gaia, countering the dichotomy of identity/alterity, resisting the temptation to offer quick answers and hastily identifying common interests among ontologically diverse publics in order to prompt collective actions. Instead, it calls for engaging in the act of questioning itself – the primary and most exquisite cosmopolitical act – by creating "interstices" (Stengers 2005), zones of "frictions" (Tsing 2005) with their potential to confront, negotiate, translate, and counter-translate the points of view of "others" that may challenge the notion of a stable, unilateral idea of the common "good" (*ibidem*) accessible and recognizable to all. These interstices are ephemeral, and raise doubts, creating openings and cracks in the idea of politics inherited from the current patriarchal Western-centric episteme (Mignolo 2018; Quijano 2000).

Stengers' invitation encourages us to revisit the epistemological framework through which we approach politics. When we still think in terms of designing participation by identifying common interests to drive diverse publics toward collective actions, we are still operating within a framework that positions the designer as a modern *deus ex machina* with access to knowledge about a universally "good" common good. However, this perspective fails to consider "matrixes of power" (Quijano 2000) of different kinds (Hooks 2000; Lugones 2020), private interests, and preconceptions that are inevitably involved in this process. We must therefore engage in a serious process of epistemological reframing to shed these naiveties, recognizing the intrinsic limitations of designing for participation, and daring to reframe the politics of our design in cosmopolitical terms in a more radical manner. This operation of reframing not only involves decentring the human but also decentring the designer as a scientist, a subject separated from the object of research. It entails confronting what we designers can and cannot do. In philosophical terms, this means challenging Kant's concept of cosmopolitanism with Stengers' notion of cosmopolitics (2005). Kant's assumption of cosmopolitanism (*ibidem*) implies that one can identify what is "good" for all humans and act accordingly, a view shared

by Arendt. Stengers helps us overcome this naivety, which often underlies designing for participation, and introduces a different understanding of the "Cosmos" (*ibidem*) that dares to extend beyond the realm of humans alone. It urges us to embrace fallibility and the realisation that what is "good" – among humans and between humans and non-humans – cannot be definitively identified.

We designers often claim to work politically by striving for the emergence of a common world shared by many. But who are these "many"? How can we ensure that this world is a "good" common world? Is it even possible? Beyond good intentions, it is necessary to reframe our understanding of our political agency as designers from an ontological perspective, de-linking from the Modern/Colonial. Once again, Stengers provides here some clarity: «The cosmopolitical proposal is incapable of giving a "good" definition of the procedures that allow us to achieve the "good" definition of a "good common world"» (Stengers 2005: 995). This notion of a "good" common world, of common interests that are universally beneficial, seems to require a superhuman, divine gaze. Ironically, this gaze is implicit when we adopt a purely human perspective, failing to consider the broader picture: the Cosmos as Gaia.[6] The Cosmos envisioned by Arendt and Kant is clearly distinct from Stengers' and Lovelock's Cosmos. Nevertheless, it is the Cosmos with which we designers should be working with and for. Admittedly, addressing this Cosmos is particularly challenging as it confronts us with our limitations and the limitations of the Western-centric epistemological framework from which design as a discipline emerged (Fry 2020), as well as the current "catastrophic" (Stengers 2005) or "dark" (Arendt 1958) times in which we live.

While Arendt's exploration of "Dark Times" (*ibidem*) urged us to rethink politics in the face of the dangers of various forms of dictatorship, calling upon women and men to transcend individualism and political disconnection and recognize what lies *in-between* us, Stengers revisits this notion in the context of ecological catastrophe, moving beyond the Modern paradigm, which Arendt struggled to overcome in her endeavour to «thinking without a banister» (Arendt 2021). To truly address what lies "in-between us", we must first question what constitutes the "we", and re-frame the

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[6]   Latour (2017); Lovelock and Margulis (1974); Stengers (2017).

Western-centric idea of identity. This requires questioning our own ideas of knowledge and what we can truly grasp about the interconnectedness between us. Stengers invites us to decentre the human perspective and consider Gaia, learning to pay "attention" to it and arguing that we have been instructed to forget not the capacity to pay attention but rather the art of paying attention:

If paying attention is an art and not merely a capacity, it implies learning and cultivating the skill of paying attention. This entails creating an obligation to imagine, check, and envisage consequences that bring together connections we habitually keep separate. Paying attention means resisting the temptation to separate what must be taken into account from what may be neglected. (Stengers 2005: 62)

To genuinely engage with a "complex we" could be the crucial first step in resisting the temptation to continue designing as usual, employing dichotomous thinking rather than a relational one, and treating knowledge as something stable, universal, and offering definitive solutions. This requires adopting both a "situated" (Haraway 1988) and "patchy" (Tsing et al. 2020) approach to knowledge, acknowledging its intrinsic situatedness and fallibility. Consequently, it involves shifting from providing answers to raising questions, instilling doubts not only about the common interests we assume but also about the very notion of who "we" are. This process generates "interstices" (Stengers 2005), counter-narratives, and "frictions" (Tsing et al. 2017) that can be found in any "patches" (Tsing 2015), i.e. landscapes or environments that are characterised by heterogeneity, fragmentation, and the presence of diverse ecological and social elements. Reconsidering the act of designing for participation from this perspective requires us to reconsider our epistemological framework, vocabulary, knowledge processing and production, work approach, expectations, and even our role as designers. It means to engage in a hesitant and stammering process of creation. This "cosmo-political responsibility" for designing challenges us to recognize the (potential) agency of non-human agents, their interplay with human ones, and their potential to contribute to the regeneration of the situated context in which we operate. It also entails considering other worldings and learning to pay attention and listen to the margins, recognizing «marginality as a site of resistance» (Hooks 1990).

Achieving this, necessitates openness to questioning ourselves and reframing our role as designers as part of a complex "we". It entails relinquishing our expectations and ideas as designers and continuously confronting the state of "not knowing" rather than assuming we possess knowledge. It also requires us to scrutinise our "good" intentions when seeking to give voice to marginalised "others" by representing their voices or enabling "the subaltern to speak" (Spivak 1993a), as positioning ourselves as true "representatives" (Latour 2018) of marginalised others can be perilous.

Given that design originates from the Western-centric tradition, we must be willing to question design from within and envision what needs to be reassessed, rethought, and reframed. Can we envision the act of creation in design as something other than a Western-centric manifestation of hubris? Stengers employs Deleuze's interpretation of Dostoevsky's fictional character Prince Myshkin and the powerful metaphor of the "idiot" as the archetype of the operation of dwelling[7] needed to step beyond the Western-centrism and anthropocentrism.

2.2. The designer as "idiot"

An image that can guide us in this process of de-creating our role as designers – as we inherited it from the Modern/Colonial episteme[8] – is Stengers' "conceptual persona" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) of the "idiot", «the uninitiated, private, or ordinary individual as opposed to the technician or expert» (Stengers 2005: 221). This metaphor might help us designers to de-create our role as "experts" and recognize ourselves as just one terrestrial amongst others (Latour 2018), as one of the many actors interacting with others, thus as part of an "engendering" system (Latour 2018; Tassinari and Manzini 2023). This means to rid oneself from the pretension to construct a universal knowledge, to design universal tools and methods to be used in every possible situation, to be able to genuinely translate and represent silent and silenced voices, to identify what is "in-between" us without questioning the "we", and generate scenarios enabling all stakeholders to action, eventually providing ultimate "solutions" to societal issues.

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[7] Deleuze and Guattari (1988); Dostoevsky (1869); Stengers (2005).
[8] Mignolo (2018); Quijano (2000).

Dostoevsky's "idiot" (1869) senses that beyond the conventions of xixth century Russian aristocracy «there is something more important» (Stengers 2005), something he cannot grasp within that given social and cultural framework. By resisting consensual knowledge, he opens an interstice, unmasking the status quo and opening the possibility for thinking otherwise:

In the ancient Greek sense, an idiot is someone who does not speak the Greek language and is therefore cut off from the civilised community. [...] But Deleuze's idiot, borrowed from Dostoievsky and turned into a conceptual character, is the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilise thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because "there is something more important". [...] There is no point in asking him "what is more important?', for "he does not know'. But his role is not to produce abysmal perplexity, not to create the famous Hegelian night, when every cow is black. We know, knowledge there is, but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorised to believe we possess the meaning of what we know. (Stengers 2005: 994)

The possibility of failing does not stop the "idiot" who intimately knows that the way in which we articulate knowledge as being exact, universal, objective, is in fact nothing but a sophisticated masquerade. When acting as idiots, we designers – and particularly when we are supposed to enable others to participate – may be able to slow down the expectations to lead everybody towards a "consensus" (Mouffe 2013), and produce interstices to question both the "common good" as the "we", problematizing matrixes of power of different kinds and envisioning alternatives, i.e. regenerative and more just futures. This means not forcing diverse common interests into a rushed "consensus", but rather creating the possibility for worlds common to all the actors involved (including the silent and silenced ones) to freely emerge, not avoiding "dissensus" (Mouffe 2013) but rather fostering it:

The "stakeholders", those who have interests in a new enterprise binding them together, should not be limited by anything external. The common world must be free to emerge from the multiplicity of their disparate links, and the only reason for that emergence are the spokes that they constitute in one another's wheels.

The connection has often been highlighted between this conception of free emergence, without transcendence, and mechanics. (Stengers 2005: 999)

When reading contemporary design practices from Stengers' perspective, there is a serious risk for them to become a "mechanic", where issues are identified and presumably "solved". We are familiar with this idea: the designer as *problem solver*. In this perspective, the ecological crisis we are facing is a *problem* to be *solved*. Indeed, a puzzling one for "humans of good will" (Stengers 2015). She warns us here, from the danger of this perspective, and provides us with some serious questions for our design practices:

How, by which artefacts, which procedures, can we slow down political ecology, bestow efficacy on the murmurings of the idiot, the "there is something more important" which is so easy to forget because it cannot be "taken into account", because the idiot neither objects nor proposes anything that "counts" [...]. How to design the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that "humans of good will decide in the name of the general interest"? How to turn the virus or the river into a cause for thinking? But also how to design it in such a way that collective thinking has to proceed "in the presence of" those who would otherwise be likely to be disqualified as having idiotically nothing to propose, hindering the emergent "common account"? (Stengers 2005: 1001)

So, how to turn the virus of the Anthropocene into a cause for thinking? How to read our "catastrophic times" (Stengers 2015) as times of hope, to reassess other forms of thinking/acting as designers? The cosmopolitical proposal becomes here very concrete: re-think our thinking/acting in idiotic terms, slowing down, opening interstices, questioning, listening, paying attention, and, most of all, re-considering who "we" (designers, human beings, cyborgs...) and who *others* are (communities, assemblages, Gaia...), recognizing our entanglements in a "complex we".

3. The case study

3.1. *The neighbourhood as a "patch"*
This theoretical framework served us as a basis for our experimentation in Nolo, a vibrant Milanese neighbourhood in which many collaborative so-

cial innovation projects are already taking place (Camocini and Fassi 2017; Fassi and Manzini 2021; Fassi and Vergani 2022, 2023). In September 2020, Politecnico di Milano opened in Nolo's municipal market a living lab called Off Campus Nolo, a place where scholars from the university are called to actively engage with social challenges, foster responsibility, and develop closer ties with the local community and its territory (Fassi and Vergani 2022). Nolo offers a rich social environment where diverse groups, spanning various ages and cultural backgrounds, coexist. Even before our presence in the neighbourhood, an active network of "situated stakeholders" (Fassi and Vergani 2023) had been developing. Right from the outset, our mission has been firmly guided by a commitment to uphold a respectful approach and maintain a wide-ranging perspective that considers the multitude of (multispecies) actors and their interconnectedness. Upholding this viewpoint, Nolo started to emerge as a complex system of lifeforms (Vergani, Tassinari, and Ferreri 2022), rather than simply a context inhabited solely by diverse human beings. That is why, inspired by the concept of "patchy" introduced by Tsing (Tsing et al. 2017) – intended as landscapes or environments that are characterised by heterogeneity, fragmentation, and the presence of diverse ecological and social elements – we identified Nolo as a social and political space shaped by contamination that emerges from transformative encounters between different species (human and non-human). When we refer to "patches" (Tsing 2015), we are specifically addressing those political spaces as portions of the city that have developed in distinctive ways as a result of the influence of unique agents and flows. These encounters form temporary assemblages which are unevenly distributed across both time (history) and space (lively landscapes). The phenomenon of urban fabric emergence in Nolo during the previous century was characterised by the establishment of physical and intangible boundaries as part of the city's expansion. This organic evolution led to the current diversity within the neighbourhood, and to its current polarizations and phenomena of marginalizations.

To bring all the different perspectives to light, we started to work within the "gaps" (Tsing 2015) emerged during the field research, where "gaps" are here intended as spaces where diverse forms of life come together, intersect, and create unexpected connections. Tsing (*ibidem*) emphasises that these gaps are not empty spaces or voids but rather dynamic areas

The AGENTS

The PATCH

The GAP

The SITUATED KNOWLEDGE
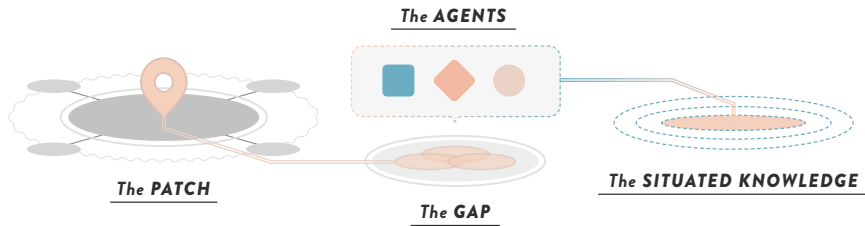
Figure 1. The situated knowledge emerging from the patch (© the authors).

where diverse actors and elements coexist and interact, as in the case of Nolo. They can be seen as openings for understanding the entanglements and entwined relationships between humans, non-human beings, and the environment. The term also highlights the importance of recognizing and exploring these interstitial spaces as productive sites for understanding and engaging with the complex multispecies world. In this sense, our research process was enhanced by the practice of the "art of noticing" (Tsing 2015) through attentive listening and observation of the gaps in the patch in search for elusive "latent commons" (*ibidem*), intended as hidden and fugitive moments of entanglement to be brought to light. In doing this, we looked at the idiot forcing ourselves to "slow-down" (*ibidem*) our recurring approach, operating in the context with the help of a tailored-made participatory project imagined with the help of the local community: the *Nolo Situated Vocabulary* (NSV).

3.2. The Nolo Situated Vocabulary

The project's founding idea is to develop an "agorà"[9] serving as a "collaborative platform" (Tassinari and Vergani 2023) for open and democratic conversations with the local community where the interdependencies of a "complex we" are articulated and become building blocks for envisioning more sustainable and just futures. The aim is to explore keywords – chosen directly by the inhabitants – that could facilitate agonistic and democratic conversations, enabling their dis-articulation and re-articulation,[10] to coun-

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[9] Arendt (1958); Tassinari, Piredda, and Bertolotti (2017); Tassinari and Staszowski (2020).

[10] Huybrechts et al. (2022); Mouffe (2013); Tassinari and Vergani (2023).

Figure 2. The 9 words and the physical vocabularies already designed (© the authors).

ter simplified understandings of what is "good" for the neighbourhood and for whom, expanding the vision of the "we", considering viewpoints that go beyond the human realm and coming from other worldings. These conversations also strive to include silent and silenced actors who may be reluctant or unable to participate, such as non-human actors whose voices are represented by scientists and local environmental activists (Vergani, Tassinari, and Ferreri 2022), but also human marginalised actors and communities, who are involved thanks to co-design activities and interviews.

To achieve this, we conducted interviews with inhabitants and experts from various disciplines, for instance Natural Sciences (including entomologists, environmental scientists, botanists), but also from Social Sciences and Humanities (such as anthropologists and linguists). This allowed a diverse range of voices to be heard, voices that would otherwise go unheard, being the NSV's pivotal idea that social innovation is not just a social but also a cultural transformation that needs continuous shaping and negotiation. An eco-systemic and more just social innovation ought to be

Figure 3. The exhibition for the first 4 words (© the authors).

considered not only a social but also as a cultural change in which diverse publics are finally granted a voice. This includes considering the interdependence of diverse (human) publics amongst each other, as well as with non-human ones, and requires rethinking social innovation not only from a more inclusive perspective but also from a non-Wester-centric, post-anthropocentric one. However, this process also acknowledges the intrinsic limitations of designing for enabling and supporting social innovation: not all publics are always reached, and the designer is not a neutral, voiceless element but a medium, a filter with its own unique voice. To work in a regenerative way and envision scenarios for multispecies coexistence, we must first do some "infrastructuring"[11] work, designing for the opening of "interstices" in the patch which may question a univocal understanding of common "good", and the "we" for which this "good" might be "common". Only through these questions and hesitations we can imagine regenerative and collaborative alternatives.

The agonistic platform of the NSV takes the form of different communicative artefacts, including a physical vocabulary (a booklet for each of the nine words, fig. 2), a podcast developed in collaboration with a local web radio, and future scenarios envisioning how the agents may possibly interact in a more regenerative way built upon the different definitions given in the vocabulary (fig. 3). Those scenarios, later shared with the local community through social media but also showcased in the physical space, prompted some collaborative actions involving publics which were previously polarised, contributing to bottom-up urban regeneration.

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[11]   Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren (2010); Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard (2014).

3.3. Designing with/for the "complex we"

NSV's endeavour is currently raising significant issues related to the politics of translation and representation. To address the local voices properly, we are following Haraway's (2016) and Spivak's (1993b) radical feminist perspectives on translation, problematizing the fact that designers often do not critically position themselves towards the politics of translation of their participatory work. To engage with those philosophies, helped us to frame translation in our work as an act of bringing visions from many perspectives into the design space, engaging in a politics of translation[12] that deconstructs our role as translators and keeps the translation space open, interpretive, critical, and partial. These voices became part of the NSV, first in a physical written form and afterwards in its oral translation and re-assemblage through the podcast. With both of those artefacts, we aimed to engage in conversations that entangled this feminist understanding of translation, embracing fallibility, vulnerability, and situatedness. It is within this epistemic space that we are (imperfectly and vulnerably) currently translating the voices and worldings of the unrepresented and marginalised.

The case study is currently validating our research hypothesis that addressing language in a situated context rather than imposing on a context a predefined idea of language/meanings can foster a sense of a "complex we" while respecting diverse worldings and promoting creativity. If we consider Spivak's (1993b: 179) assertion that «making sense of ourselves is what produces identity», then through this experimentation, we are experiencing how the NSV can facilitate the difficult task of a neighbourhood's identity creation: an identity not artificially constructed but rather emerging from a situated thinking that engages with the irreducibility of alterities and differences, the ineffability and fundamental heteroglossia of language, the polymorphism of reality, and the multiple worldings shaping our contemporary perception of the "world of many worlds" (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) to which we collectively give form.

As each neighbourhood has its own vocabulary, shaped by the different languages spoken, the diverse "ghosts" (Tsing et al. 2017) inhabiting the area, and the various memories, stories, hopes, and visions that move its

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[12]   Huybrechts, Devisch, and Tassinari (2022); Spivak (1993b).

citizens, what could be then Nolo's own vocabulary? When social innovation occurs at the neighbourhood level, a cultural shift takes place in the streets: a dynamic social intelligence that can lead to further transformations, which is yet not univocal, but polyphonic, is slowly formed. We had here to be careful not to "translate" this social intelligence in a way that it could *fix* its polyphonic, agonistic, contesting meanings as he intention of the NSV is not to create a consensual "common language" (Haraway 1988), but rather to maintain its "heteroglossia" (*ibidem*). Through collaboration, individuals may discover diverse motivations, and seemingly distant people may find unexpected convergences. Crystallised positions can be questioned, and criticalities may come to the surface. Inspired by Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" (1988) and her questioning of universal, exact forms of knowledge, we embarked on exploring ways to generate an NSV that does not fix meanings conclusively but rather keeps them open, fostering an agonistic space for encounters among (ontologically) diverse actors. Throughout this process, we had to carefully balance when it could be possible for us to elevate marginalised voices and grant them agencies, enabling them to speak and when we rather had to "translate" those voices as they could or would not speak for themselves. We encountered here the risk of positioning ourselves as uncritical and objective translators, "representatives" (Latour 2018) potentially patronising agencies by translating them in a-critical way and imposing forms and meanings that may not adequately represent them, not questioning the power implicit in the act of translating.

We therefore questioned who we are (and who possibly legitimated us) to translate those *other* voices and how we can ensure that we are genuinely translating them without imposing our own role as storytellers (Tassinari, Piredda, and Bertolotti 2017), and that we are aware of the intrinsic limitations and naiveties of this process of translation. In our design process, we often came back to Spivak's reflections on the "subaltern":

According to Foucault and Deleuze, the oppressed can speak and know their conditions if given the chance. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor, can the subaltern speak? (Spivak 1993a: 25)

If the "subaltern", the oppressed, the silent and silenced, should speak without being represented, what happens when these conditions are not there? What can we do as designers today to support the emergence of the preconditions for the subaltern to speak? While the voices of human subalterns are often hindered by colonial power structures (Mignolo 2018; Quijano 2000), the situation becomes even more complex when considering non-human agents. The process of "othering" becomes an ontological "othering", in which the scientific language and the voice of scientists' risk becoming predominant (Latour 2018). This is not solely a linguistic issue but a political one, requiring a language that questions its own politics and goes beyond the Western-centric epistemological framework. For example, to reframe the subject-object opposition as a "complex we" (de la Cadena 2019), where the "we" represents the dense and interconnected entanglement between humans and non-human beings within the Western episteme, allows us to live "with" one another (*ibidem*), a real act of "sym-poiesis" (Haraway 2016) countering auto-poiesis as an individualistic action. The "complex we" represents a shared condition where the "self" and the "other" emerge relationally, asserting their divergence and acknowledging their heterogeneity while remaining distinct (de la Cadena 2019).

Reframing our understanding of designing for participation from the perspective of the "complex we" helps address the risk of a patronising and patriarchal notion of authorship and challenges the process of "giving voice to", unravelling its naivety while also recognizing its potential for regeneration and political action. We therefore need to question not only our role as translators/representatives but also as individuals who separate ourselves from the *others*. Reconsidering the "we" beyond the Western-centric epistemic matrix proves essential for supporting "the web of life" (Escobar 2018) and facilitating multispecies coexistence within the situated contexts in which we design. To seriously engage with the cosmopolitics of design both requires to de-anthropocentrize our gaze as well as to de-link from the Western-centric episteme: in other words, questioning political agency of designing, unmasking the naivety that often pervades our practices, revaluating the idea of "socius" we consider, and uncovering the power structures that may otherwise pass unnoticed.

4. Conclusions

The NSV challenges a univocal idea of the "we" and our common "good", proposing to re-frame the "good" as the entanglements of radical interdependencies present in the territory and question where these interdependencies have been disrupted and why, envisioning possible ways to weave them back together and supporting the emergence of open-ended, fallible collaborative, and yet agonistic urban regeneration processes.

To address issues such as social justice and its intrinsic relationship with environmental justice requires first redefining the "we", re-framing our epistemological framework in more embodied, situated ways (Tassinari and Vergani 2023). In our design, we conceived he NSV as a situated tool not designed to generate objectively measurable "results" but rather to serve as an agonistic tool for debate, opening the idea of the "we", our worldviews, and understandings, and resist the temptation to offer "solutions" to the context in which we design. Stengers' cosmopolitical proposal helped us to recognize the risk of reverting to a universalistic, patriarchal, Western-centric form of knowledge that proposes "solutions", "methods", and "universal tools". Besides, the "conceptual persona" of the "idiot" prevented us from conceiving our ontological design endeavour as an "expert" (Stengers 2015) kind of design – a universal knowledge acquired once and for all and to be applied to diverse contexts. This challenges the notion of designers as well-intentioned humans of "good will", who "decide in the name of the general interest" (Stengers 2015). To counter this triumphalist vision of design as a "solution" to "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber 1974), the cosmopolitical proposal – challenging us not to consider ourselves authorised "to believe we possess the meaning of what we know" (Stengers 2015) – might prove pivotal.

The designer as "idiot" is caught between the awareness of current emergencies pushing her/him/it/them to act and a sense of hesitation, a feeling that there is something more important, something ineffable which simply cannot be framed in logocentric, dichotomous terms. To do this, we need to be confronted with the fundamental "not knowing" (de la Cadena 2021) as the basis for what we can actually know: in other words, an idea of knowledge that comes at peace with what we cannot know. Stepping out of the Western-centric framework requires us to reconsider what we designers can truly accomplish. If we want to take our (cosmo)polit-

ical responsibility seriously and envision possible forms of multispecies collaborative survival, of "sym-poiesis" (Haraway 2016), "making-with" (*ibidem*) *others*, we need to stay engaged with this complexity and embrace an interstitial, "idiotic", and situated approach to design, one that is, fallible, contradictory, "minor" (Deleuze et al. 1983).

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Designing with the Other
Collaboration and Plurality as a Growth Potential for Designers

1. Introduction

Design requires a remarkable ability to collaborate with the Other. Indeed, designers are required to effectively manage relational and collaborative tasks while designing with plural others (e.g., Christensen et al. 2017; Gautam 2012; Lee 2016; McAra and Ross 2020; Murdoch-Kitt and Emans 2020; Voûte et al. 2020). Designers are in charge of finding solutions by combining different expertise. Hence, they must manage their interpersonal relationship with co-workers, informants, managers and technicians, to mention only a few. Therefore, collaborative skills may also be framed as hard skill for designers, making it relevant to reflect on acquiring these competencies in the design curriculum. Moreover, the Other often differs from the Self as societies are becoming increasingly interconnected. In this scenario, all the competencies related to the intercultural dimension are increasingly recognised as paramount goals of formal education and lifelong learning. According to Bennet (2015), a widespread consensus exists among researchers and international organisations that "global competence" is key for working and living with people from different cultures, as it is critical to achieving inclusion, essential for reducing ethnocentrism and bias among people, and central to build productive and positive relations both within one's own culture and internationally. Global competence is here intended as defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

[...] a multidimensional, life-long learning goal. Globally competent individuals can examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and worldviews, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being. (OECD 2019: 166)

This competence is identified under a myriad of different names (i.e., global competence, intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural effectiveness, intercultural skills, cross-cultural adaptation, multicultural competence, cross-cultural relations, cultural proficiency, intercultural agility, cultural intelligence) and it is one of the top ten skills required from leaders and employees in the 21st century (Bennett 2015). Several international bodies have undertaken studies aimed at providing references for global competence development. Among others, in 2016 the European Commission published an influential document called Competences For Democratic Culture where a general conceptualisation of global competence is provided (Council of Europe 2016). This conceptualisation was developed through wide-ranging auditing of existing conceptual schemes that identified general competencies on the four dimensions. The output was then revised and finalised through the involvement of academic experts, education practitioners and policymakers, and was formalised with the publication of the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe 2018). The competence is here framed into 20 competences divided into four groups: (i) values, (ii) attitudes, (iii) skills, and (iv) knowledge and critical understanding (tab. 1). The conceptualisation provided is intertwined with the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals and was also adopted by OECD as the main reference to build the assessment strategy for acquiring global competencies for 15 years-old students in different countries (OECD 2019).

All of this suggested that designers in the 21st century must also be equipped to collaborate with others across cultures and beyond disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, working with plural others is fundamental for future practitioners, as design is increasingly recognised as a discipline that connects different knowledge domains, as a profession that facilitates the dialogue between different stakeholders. Hopefully, together with society, higher design education is becoming more and more plural, providing a safe setting for students to experience themselves in the interrelationship with the *plural Other* and become globally competent. Plurality is often experienced in academia and is already supported by internationalisation policies and the development of interdisciplinary pathways. Another relevant characteristic of design education is the learning-by-doing approach (Tracey and Boling 2014); students are engaged in educational projects through which they learn how to design artefacts. This approach belongs

Table 1. The framework of global competence proposed by the Council of Europe. Retrieved by "Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. Volume 1: Context, Concepts and Model" (2018).

Values	Attitudes	Skills	Knowledge and Critical Understanding
Valuing human dignity and human rights	Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices	Autonomous learning skills	Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
Valuing cultural diversity	Respect	Analytical and critical thinking skills	Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law	Civic-mindedness	Skills of listening and observing	Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability
	Responsibility	Empathy	
	Self-efficacy	Flexibility and adaptability	
	Tolerance of ambiguity	Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills	
		Co-operation skills	
		Conflict-resolution skills	

to the broader pedagogical framework of problem-based learning, where learning is conveyed by actively solving a problem that is initially posed by teachers (Sancassani et al. 2019; Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2004). Design has inherited this approach from education in architecture, art and craft, in which it was historically rooted in the design studio pedagogy.

Some proclaim that as a pedagogical method the design studio has no comparable model relative to its intensity and involvement [...]. Certainly, compared to typical classroom scenarios, studios are active sites where students are engaged intellectually and socially, shifting between analytic, synthetic, and evaluative models of thinking in different sets of activities (drawing, conversing, model-making). That these attributes characterise many studios is clear and attests the uniqueness of the studio as a vehicle for student education. (Dutton 1987: 16)

From Dutton's words it emerges that through studio pedagogy, students shift between numerous different thinking models, activities and types of interaction, while being engaged in solving a realistic design problem. Central to design education, the *learning-by-doing* is nowadays employed in different courses – workshops, ateliers, hackathons, etc. – that share a pedagogical framework which could be called "design-based learning", and defined as the one «that engages students in solving real-life design

problems while reflecting on the learning process» (Gómez Puente 2014: 4). It is particularly relevant that *design-based learning* often requires students to undertake collaborative activities to develop their projects (Barkley et al. 2014), such as group work, peer reviews with classmates or in-class discussions. These activities, which already exist in design education practices, could provide a valuable opportunity for students to relate with *plural others* in an educational context.

Various student-centred pedagogies can help students develop critical thinking regarding global issues, respectful communication, conflict management skills, perspective taking and adaptability. Group-based co-operative project work can improve reasoning and collaborative skills. It involves topics or theme-based tasks suitable for various levels and ages, in which goals and content are negotiated by all participants, and learners can create their own learning materials that they present and evaluate together (OECD 2019: 174).

Group-based courses are one of the most appropriate settings for students to develop global competencies, supporting the assumption that collaborations in design education could also provide an occasion for learning about and with the Other. Several authors argued that while there are teaching activities based on collaborative design-based learning, there is little research on understanding the phenomenon and the dynamics of learning design collaboratively in plural contexts (Poggenpohl 2004; Poggenpohl and Sato 2009; Wilson and Zamberlan 2015). Among others, Bulone (2016) showed how global competence is strictly related to design thinking regarding attitudes and skills. His research indeed showed that, in literature, a set of competencies that are typically connected to *design thinking* actually overlap with global competencies (Bulone 2016). Attitudes and skills such as empathy, open-mindedness or tolerance to ambiguity and unfamiliar situations are examples of competences that are widely acknowledged as fundamental for designers, and at the same time are deemed necessary to interact with others in culturally-plural contexts. We can therefore argue that design thinkers and globally competent people have much in common; hence, global attitudes and skills appear to be relevant outcomes of design education. We assume that students should improve and develop this set of soft skills as much as hard skills in their learning paths, and educators have a role in fostering this process.

2. Learning design with the Other: lights and shadows

Global competence may be therefore identified as an intended learning outcome of collaborative *design-based learning*. By proposing any form of collaborative activities in their courses, design educators create an opportunity for students to experience plurality and different perspectives, hence becoming culture-sensitive when it comes to collaborating with others. Nevertheless, thinking this is an automatic and obvious process can be misleading. For instance, imagine that we are at the beginning of a design studio in the first year of a master's degree course in design attended by students from different countries, from different bachelor courses, of different ages, with different work experience and the ability to speak English (which we assume to be the lingua franca in an academic context).

This example is very similar to the one we experience in our daily lives as teachers, which also helps us establish the context of this research. The task for the students during the semester is to collaboratively design an artefact from a project brief through group work. We expect that in the group, there will be different skills related to design, but since students are all adults, we take for granted that they will be able to work with others. However, this assumption needs to be analysed in light of the considered situated context, strongly characterised by cultural plurality.

First, how each individual acts while cooperating and relating to others is strongly influenced by one's own way of seeing the world, which is rooted in the *cultural contexts* in which the person knows or has lived. The conscious choice of the plural form when speaking of cultural contexts is to highlight that each individual's culture is shaped and constructed through the experience in multiple communities, from which the person learns "his/her way of doing things". The definition of culture is a complex and slippery path explored by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and scholars in numerous fields. The extent of possible definitions of culture is well illustrated in the work by anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who collected, organised and analysed 164 definitions of the word "culture" formulated by social scientists. Without looking for a definition, but rather with the intent of clarifying the general idea of culture emerged from their investigation, they expressed the outcome of their research with the following formula:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e, historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181)

In the lines that follows, Kroeber and Kluckhohn foresee the individual variability of culture as one of the possible modifications that this formula could undergo by scholars. Individuals unconsciously pattern their behaviours through unique cultural forms and logic that cannot be explained through general principles since they relate to the culture-personality continuum (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952).

Going back to our groups of students' example, this means that each person has different ways of working with others and different perspectives. These perspectives not only influence the behaviours of the individual but also the way the person sees and judge others' behaviours. As we have just said, these differences exist both because of individual personality and culture. If students are not aware that through their life experiences, they have learned "their ways of doing things", they might assume that their way of acting is correct and that the others are misbehaving or acting strangely.

We are all limited by our cultural glasses (none of us views the real world), and our perceptions of the others serve to define ourselves. In order to grasp the *deeper meanings* of what seems a strange and alien way of "doing things", we are required to overcome our own negative perceptions of others, to change perspective and to interpret the action of others in their own terms. The trigger point is an unfamiliar or "strange" situation, and this means that the first step towards intercultural awareness lies in not letting such a situation pass unnoticed, as often happens (Mahadevan 2017).

Mahadevan's words resonate with the idea of *grasping the more profound meanings* underneath ways of acting because it once again brings us back to the design profession. In re-founding design through semantics, Krippendorf (2006) suggested that designers should be capable of making meaning emerge from their conversations with others, which is necessary as their

role is to make sense of things. The designer should therefore be able to question, listen and understand the way the Other understands.

Questions concerning meanings generate stories in which artifacts play the roles that their tellers give them, consistent with the experiences they have with them. While stories can never capture all the meanings that informants could bring into a narrative, especially their feelings and tacit understandings, conversations provide a window into the understanding that others have and that designers need to understand. The key to this understanding is unprejudicial listening, avoiding our own categories, and being careful in rearticulating these stories in our own terms (Krippendorff 2006: 55).

Unprejudicial listening of the Other underlies that an individual is aware of his/her own worldviews (or biases), is capable of suspending judgement, and devotes time to actively listening to others' narratives. Going back to the previous example, if it is assumed that students can collaborate with others, we might then overlook the collaborative aspects that regulate the design process. In this case, as teachers, we will not know how students work together, let alone whether they do so with cultural sensitivity.

When people are culturally-unaware while interacting across cultures, this may lead to some negative implications such as ethnocentrism, naïve realism, categorisation (Mahadevan 2017) and stereotyping. Ethnocentrism is described as one of the main barriers to healthy intercultural relations and as a means to consider one's own culture as the centre of everything and therefore the unit of measurement to evaluate others' cultures. Stereotypes and categorisations strictly relate to ethnocentrism and constitute an obstacle to developing awareness that one's own practice may be neither the only nor the best way of doing things (Bennett 2015).

Having this in mind, we can now observe our class groups and notice behaviours that denote a certain lack of sensitivity to plurality: for example, there may be students who tend to assume that their way of organising work and handling the design task is superior or somehow better than that of people with other cultural affiliations. Or it may be the case that a student considers some groupmates as not very capable just because they are less talkative or do not voice their opinion during group meetings. Both of these attitudes could be the result of judging the way others act from one's own cultural perspective, assuming that "the way I would act" is necessarily the best way.

Related to ethnocentrism, naïve realism refers to the inevitable initial assumption that subjective perceptions correspond to objective reality, and this applies to the way a person understands interactions with others, experiences with objects and events (Ross et al. 2010). If one takes for granted that the way he/she perceives the world is how the world actually is, once again stereotypes and categories based on cultural assumptions might arise (Mahadevan 2017). In our teaching experience sometimes we saw ways of relating among students that conceal these kinds of stereotypes and categorisations, and we wondered how it is possible to raise awareness in relationships among students who collaborate on design projects in culturally plural settings.

3. Supporting students in getting ready to collaborate with the Other: our experience

Even though the presence of culturally plural individuals is a potentially favourable condition, cultural plurality is not sufficient to ensure inclusion or awareness, and must necessarily be followed up in teaching practices (Spiro 2014). A first fundamental step is to help each student get prepared to collaborate and not take for granted that all students are equally competent in interrelating with the Other.

> Few students come to higher education with well-developed team skills and to function in teams, they will need a range of skills and abilities that include interpersonal skills, active learning, team building and management, inquiry skills, conflict skills and presentation skills. (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2004: 78)

As we have seen, if it is assumed that students are already trained or prepared to work in teams, it could happen that they will work in teams without having the right set of skills or tools, and possibly they will take for granted that "their own way of working" is right or is the best (which is even worse). Moreover, if the students experiencing plural collaborations are culturally-unaware, it is very likely that they will fall into ethnocentrism, naïve realism, categorisation and stereotyping. Taking as a primary example the context in which we teach, i.e., Product Design programmes at Politecnico di Milano, we observed that in the most of design-based learning courses, from the second year of the bachelor's programme until the final year of

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the master's programme, students are engaged with teamwork. Even if this type of collaborative courses is very frequent – minimum one per semester – a structured training on teamwork and collaborative skills is still missing. This observation found confirmation from the field research we conducted with students in their final year of the Master in Design & Engineering (Mattioli and Ferraris 2021). The research consisted of structuring a tutorship path on teamwork (T4T) in the context for a group of 51 students along their entire master's programme between 2019 and 2021. The fundamental idea underpinning the T4T design was to provide tutorship for students engaged in teamwork in the Design Studios. At the end of the path, six students participated in a focus group to evaluate the proposed path, also sharing their general impressions about collaborations throughout their learning path. The group reported to have experienced a lack of preparation for collaboration in their academic career, despite always having to work in teams in design-based courses. Moreover, students reported that before the T4T, they perceived themselves as "highly experienced in teamwork" and, after participating in the path, students realised their limitations and that there was room for improvement. For instance, they recognised that they were not used to talk about teamwork or consider it as something that can be discussed, questioned and improved. The path helped them to make rules and roles explicit and provided structured moments for sharing their individual perceptions about teamwork and each teammate's contribution. Just starting to talk about teamwork as a part of their learning was considered by students an awareness-rising activity that helped them achieve better team results and improve teams' dynamics and communication (see Mattioli and Ferraris 2021).

«To start talking about teamwork, I think it is the most important part of the path», a student stated during the focus group (in Mattioli and Ferraris 2021).

In the previous paragraph we addressed the negative consequences of culturally-unaware interactions and suggested unprejudicial listening to the Other as their antidote. Our discussion here starts to intertwine even more closely the theme of global competences with that of collaborative competences. From students' words it emerged that the issue is possibly even more profound than being culturally-unaware, since they showed a lack of reflection and awareness of their abilities to relate with the Other

during collaborations. Or, at least, they affirmed that they had never been asked to reflect, talk or report about teamwork as it was not a crucial part of their learning. The results of the focus group showed that, with a little effort, design educators can radically change students' perceptions, raising awareness about collaborating and fostering a more sensitive relationship with the Other.

This result finds support in both collaborative learning and intercultural learning literature. Specifically, Barkley et al. (2014) suggested that orienting students prior and during collaborative learning activities helps them – especially those resistant to group work – to understand and appreciate the value of working with others. At the same time, educators can integrate practices to foster a student's sensitive attitude towards intercultural collaborations. The book *Intercultural Collaboration by Design* (2020) recently published by Kelly M. Murdoch-Kitt and Denielle J. Emans, appears to be particularly insightful. Being experienced design educators, the two authors proposed a series of exercises based on visual thinking to promote culture-sensitive collaborations among designers and design students. Most interestingly, this work highlighted how visual culture and design can powerfully support teachers in rising students' awareness on plurality and at the same time promote good practices to work with the Other, so that their activities mostly «involve creating, sharing, editing and interpreting different *Tangible Objects* as manifestations of visual thinking» (Murdoch-Kitt and Emans 2020: 5). The idea is that making objects and sharing them with others is a process that facilitates learning and understanding of the Other (Murdoch-Kitt and Emans 2020).

As design teachers, we also believe that making is a powerful way to build and share knowledge around ways to reshape our practices and to encourage students to become globally-competent while collaborating with the Other. For this reason, action research has been adopted as the preferred approach in carrying out this research. In education, action research is indeed pointed out as one of the most appropriate approaches to develop and evaluate teaching strategies, and for this reason it is widely used in education as a *practice-changing practice* (Efron and Ravid 2019; Kemmis et al. 2014; Stringer 2013), and is defined as «an inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning» (Efron and Ravid 2019). Action research indeed helps

building a body of knowledge to establish effective practices (Stringer 2013). Action research is important for the progress of teaching practices, and is also one of the paramount approaches of design research, where knowledge is often constructed starting from specific cases and solutions, moving from practice to theory, from specific to general (Buchanan 2001). Through action research, we developed three simple exercises informed by design and delivered with the support of several tangible objects. These tangible objects, together with the associated exercises, are presented and discussed herein as the result of the several iterations of action research conducted in past three years in our teaching activities at Politecnico di Milano. Our intention is twofold: on the one side, providing design teachers with some examples of activities aimed at developing awareness on collaboration and at supporting students in developing higher cultural-sensitivity towards the Other.

4. Three exercises for students to familiarise with the Other in plural collaborations

We herein present three simple exercises we designed and delivered to students to engage them in unprejudicial listening to the Other. All the activities share an overarching structure and some common characteristics. The structure envisages four recurring steps per each activity, namely (i) preparing the ground; (ii) self-reflecting and representing own perspective; (iii) sharing with and listening to others; and (iv) acting together. After acting together, the next activity starts, again with a reflection on the action (Schön 1987). Along with commenting these steps, in the following lines we will also provide an overview of the shared characteristics of the activities, which were designed following some principles identified in our previous work (Mattioli et al. 2018).

(i) The first step – *preparing the ground* – is crucial to inform students and orient them on the aims of the activity and to explain how it works. This information is delivered both in oral and written form, to allow all the students to go back to the introduction and instructions and to revise them: this ensures that everyone will feel safe and included, despite their different proficiency levels. In addition, activities and therefore instructions are designed to be easy and simple, once again to allow everyone to participate

with no high cognitive load, intending cognitive load as the total amount of mental effort being used to accomplish a certain task. Students should be relaxed while doing the exercises, since an unstressed atmosphere among participants may foster the process of building mutual understanding (Mattioli et al. 2018).

(ii) In the second step, all and each student is provided with adequate time to reflect on his/her own perception and feelings and to represent them on a shared canvas. These canvases have a given format and each student fills them with contents related to their personal experiences, perspectives and perceptions. This step is crucial for each students to devote time to self-reflection and to represent what is felt or perceived, deciding what and how they want to share with others and leaving time to everyone to pick the right words and write them down. Storytelling is very important as it leads to building deep connections between participants, and talks and gestures are essential to build shared understanding (Wardak 2016). Assuming English as lingua franca, language is a critical issue in plural collaborations since the team communicates using a certain language with different proficiency levels, and this can lead to issues of power and unbalances among team members (Mahadevan 2017). Moreover, using English as lingua franca does not simply mean that all people involved in the conversation speak English, as everyone speaks English according to his/her own cultural assumptions. It is essential that both non-native speakers and native speakers are given the time and help they need to express their feelings in an adequate and comprehensive way. Since the objective is to build mutual understanding, it is important to give team members time to think about words to use and let them explain "what they mean with those words" to communicate more effectively.

(iii) The third step of the overarching activities' structure requires students to share their own perspective, represented on the canvas, with others, and also to listen to t he others while they share their own. This step is the most crucial, because it is when the students are actively engaged in listening to the Other. The information and guidelines provided in the preparing the ground step can help them to listen with a non-judgemental attitude and try to put themselves in others' shoes. The standard format

has some important consequences on this phase, since everybody knows the canvas, which leads to better understanding of others during the sharing phase. A standard layout also promote equity of perspectives, since each individual is given the same space as the others to express his/her subjective ideas: limits will be set for more talkative students in sharing their perspectives just as much as less talkative ones will be pushed to express theirs. Moreover, the way each student represents his/her viewpoint reveals differences and similarities, showing how different people can create connections and have multiple worldviews.

(iv) Finally, students are requested to take action with others and therefore engage in collaborative activities or to identify solutions to change their collaboration for the better. Devoting time to making sense together of that which has emerged from sharing is important for students, to collaboratively translate their ideas, concerns and findings into appropriate and responsible individual or collaborative actions aimed at improving their conditions (Center for Global Education 2013).

To summarise, the main characteristics of each exercise are: (a) using a standard format to be filled with personal perspectives; (b) providing time to think, find words, communicate effectively; (c) providing time to listen and to talk about individual perspectives; (d) providing time to discuss, to make sense together and improve actions; and (e) giving easy, simple exercises and instructions.

5. First activity: *Introduce Yourself!*
Reflecting on the self and knowing others

When in a design-based learning course a plural class is newly formed and a collaborative activity is about to start, it may be useful to create a formal space for students to introduce themselves to each other before asking them to start engaging with the collaborative making. The assumption underpinning this first activity is that everyone is different, the way each individual is and behaves is shaped by his/her different experiences. To reflect on who we are and which our skills are, is a paramount step for getting ready to relate to others while accomplishing a certain task. Seeing that others are similar or different from ourselves supports the understanding

Figure 1. *Introduce Yourself!* The canvas.

that different ways of being and different perspectives exist. We thus conceived this first icebreaking activity, *Introduce Yourself!*, which is aimed at having every student reflect on him/herself and getting to know the other students, and is also aimed at helping disclose the complexity that each person embodies and to support the whole class (both students and professors) in the grouping phase.

Preparing the ground
First, we make explicit to students that they will work in groups and that collaboration will provide them an important opportunity to develop design-related hard skills and soft skills. While introducing the exercise, we list several examples of both types of skills, also pointing out how both hard and soft skills are highly relevant for designers.

Self-reflecting and representing one's own perspective
Each student fills a canvas for this activity (fig. 1) that contains different sections for students to introduce themselves. In the upper part, the student enters a series of personal information to share with classmates as a support to describing his/her personal background (i.e., name and surname, nickname, origin, language spoken), experiences (i.e., places where

he/she has lived, academic path) and worldviews (i.e., motto). In the lower part, the students are asked to present themselves by building on personal strengths and things they would like to improve in collaborating with others on design tasks. The canvas is provided to students in the standard format shown in the figure.

Sharing with and listening to others
During the class, each student is given time to introduce him/herself by explaining his/her canvas to others. Some people might prefer to just read that which they wrote on the canvas; others add comments and additional explanations while presenting themselves to others. They have the chance to present their skills, pointing out the strengths and competences they would like to improve. While a student speaks, the others listen to him/her and identify the classmates they would like to work with, also by considering who are the ones with skills complementary to theirs.

Acting together
In our classes, in some cases we leave students free to form groups, while in others case it is us, the teachers, who decide the groups (Mattioli et al. 2020). The activity supports both grouping methods, since it helps both students and educators to better known each other. When it is us, the professors, who form the group, before doing so we usually give each student the opportunity to freely indicate the classmates he/she considers complementary to him/herself based on student self introductions.

6. Second activity: *Team Agreement*
to share expectations, agree on rules and roles
Once the groups are formed, we propose this activity for team members to share expectation and agree on rules and roles in the team. Group agreements and contracts are widely used prior to collaborations to make sure all team members are on the same page and that they all approve the way work will be organised (Barkley et al. 2014). Accordingly, we designed the Team Agreement activity to support newly formed working groups and guide them in make explicit that which each member offers and asks to the group, but also to collectively decide the rules to collaborate with each other.

Figure 2. Example of how students list their personal offers and expectations.

Preparing the ground

We first explain that is important to make personal expectations explicit, since it helps everyone to share what each one believes he/she can offer to the group (i.e., hard and soft skills, attitude, background knowledge), but also what he/she expects from others. Then, we clarify that agreeing on roles and rules in the team helps each team member not take things for granted. By creating together and signing the agreement, each student becomes responsible for respecting and demand respect for the agreed rules. The Team Agreement becomes the foundational document of the collaboration that is about to start.

Self-reflecting and representing one's own perspective

In the very first part, each student is given time to reflect and write his/her personal offers and expectations, as in the example (fig. 2).

Sharing with and listening to others

Students start creating the Team Agreement (fig. 3) by sharing with their teammates' offers and expectations and writing them on a sheet. We suggest students not to be afraid to ask explanations to others when something is unclear, to make sure nothing remains implicit or unsaid.

Figure 3. On the left is the scheme provided to create the team agreement, on the right is an example of team agreement created by a group of students.

Acting together
This activity is strongly linked to that of acting together, since the team literally creates the Team Agreement (fig. 3). As a first step, each team decides its rules by answering the following guiding questions:

– How will we communicate?
– How will we share documents and materials (update, naming files, sharing platform)?
– Where and when will we meet?
– How will we make decisions?
– How will we divide the work to do?
– How and when will we discuss how is it going?
– How will we deal with issues or arguments?

These are rules we expect to be decided by students, but we leave them free to also add other rules. We also provide them with suggestions on possible tools to share files (i.e., Google Drive, Microsoft One Drive, Drop-

box), organise files (i.e., deciding a shared method to collect documents in folders or to name them), organise communication through a shared platform (i.e., Slack, Webex Teams, Microsoft Teams) and organise tasks (i.e., Miro, Trello, Slack).

Finally, students have to agree on roles in the team, and this gives everyone a purpose for participating and ensure that the various aspects of the design task are addressed (Barkley et al. 2014). Rather than dividing roles based on the various aspects of the design, we suggest students to assign roles related to the organisational aspects, as the six roles suggested by Mills and Cottel (in Barkley et al. 2014), namely the *facilitator*, the *recorder*, the *reporter*, the *timekeeper*, the *materials manager*, the *wildcard* (tab. 2). Each team is free to decide the roles to assign and even to not assign some of. The roles are decided in the beginning and student rotate in them throughout the development of the design task. After deciding the roles, all the group members sign the Team Agreement: now the team is ready to start the collaboration.

Table 2. Six Common Group Roles (Mills e Cottel 1998 in Barkley et al. 2014: 86).

|	
Facilitator	Moderates all team discussion, keeping the group on task for each assignment and ensuring that everybody assumes their share of the work. Facilitators strive to make sure that all group members have the opportunity to learn, to participate, and to earn the respect of other group members.
Recorder	Records any assigned team activities. Recorders take notes summarising discussion, keep all necessary records (including data sheets such as attendance and homework check-offs), and complete worksheets or written assignments for submission to the instructor.
Reporter	Serves as group spokesperson and orally summarises the group's activities or conclusions. Reporters also assist the recorder with the preparation of reports and worksheets.
Timekeeper	Keeps the group aware of time constrains, works with the facilitator to keep the group on task, and can also assume a role of any mussing group member. The timekeeper is also responsible for any set-up and for ensuring that the team's work area is in good condition when the session ends.
Materials manager	[...] Materials managers ensure that all relevant class materials are in the folder at the end of the class session.
Wild card	Assumes the role of any missing member or fills in however needed.
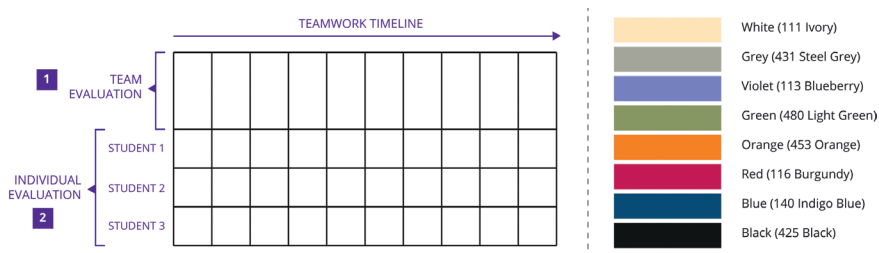
Figure 4. Teamwork Colour Matrix and the colour palette selected (Mattioli and Calvo Ivanovic 2021).

7. Third activity: Teamwork Colour Matrix to evaluate the making and improving together

After working together for a period of time, we propose a peer and group self-evaluation, aimed at helping students and teams to improve their collaboration. These type of evaluations help students to reflect on their way to collaborate and, if needed, help them to speak about issues and collectively find solutions (Mattioli and Ferraris 2019). This activity was designed with the help of a colour researcher and presented in previous publications (Calvo Ivanovic and Mattioli 2021; Mattioli and Calvo Ivanovic 2021).

Preparing the ground
We explain that the activity is aimed at:
– reflecting and making explicit personal thoughts and feelings about teamwork;
– identifying what works well and what can be improved in teamwork and interactions;
– providing a shared tool that gives the space to each individual to express his/her own experience;
– verifying the Team Agreement and updating it in the light of one's own experience;
– improving teamwork in the next tasks.

All students are reminded to be constructive and assertive in providing feedback, and to actively listen to others. We then introduce the Teamwork Colour Matrix (TCM), consisting of a blank orthogonal grid designed to be the canvas to be filled with one or more colours from a predefined 8-colours

Figure 5. Example of Teamwork Colour Matrix created by students (Calvo Ivanovic and Mattioli 2021).

palette (Calvo Ivanovic and Mattioli 2021). The diversity of the chromatic palette (i.e., hue, lightness, saturation) was designed to provide a variety of colours to visually represent different moods, moments or meanings when representing the teamwork experience. Within the TCM, the teamwork experience can be divided into the different moments on the horizontal axis (fig. 4, teamwork timeline) which the students freely decide to associate with one of the colours. TCM allows students to visually represent each part of the process.

Self-reflecting and representing one's own perspective
As a first step, students are required to individually evaluate the collective experience of teamwork (fig. 4, team evaluation) by colouring the upper row of the grid. After this, they are asked to produce a brief written description of the visual representation. Then, each student colours the lower rows, evaluating his/her individual performance as well as the performance of each team member (fig. 4, individual evaluation) by colouring the upper row of the grid. After this, they are asked to produce a brief written description of the visual representation. Then, each student colours the lower rows, evaluating his/her individual performance as well as the performance of each team member (fig. 5).

Sharing with and listening to others
Once every team member has created his/her TCM, the team gathers and the sharing phase starts. Students are provided with simple rules to follow in this phase:
– one speaks, the others listen without interrupting;
– the one who speaks starts from his/her own needs and feelings;

- evaluate the overall teamwork experience by presenting one's own TCM;
- when everybody has spoken, students can build together a shared understanding of their teamwork.

At this stage we also explicitly state that we are available for support if the groups have problems to which they cannot find a solution.

Acting together
When the team finishes the sharing phase it is ready to read again the initial Team Agreement and decide possible updates in the light of that which has been experienced. The group is free to change rules and rotate in roles.

8. Conclusion
Learning design with awareness and sensitivity to others: a first milestone along the way

These activities are an example of how design educators can easily begin a conversation with students on the themes of plurality and collaboration with the Other. The results achieved so far show that these kinds of courses can help develop greater awareness in students and develop their skills in relating to the Other. Especially, in design-based learning courses where students are asked to collaborate on a design task, a few simple tricks can support inclusive attitudes and help everyone to understand that different visions can co-exist and that, above all, from this plurality one can learn to become a better designer. Clearly, we do not believe that these three activities alone can be an exhaustive answer to such a broad and complex issue. The research we have carried out so far is only a step towards a didactic approach that considers the relationship with the Other as a critical aspect not to be taken for granted. In this sense, we hope that the discussion about the structure and characteristics of the activities presented can support other educators as design guidelines for educational activities aimed at fostering the development of global and collaborative competences.

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Reuse as an Ecological Approach to Otherness Design

1. Introduction

The recent Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as an acute symptom of a more general emerging behaviour and its effect on contemporary thinking spans over several spheres. The conditions of existence of a liberalistic model of economic growth have proved no longer compatible not only with the well-being of people but also with their individual health. The latter cannot be possibly guaranteed independently on the health of the community and the planet; therefore, a radical paradigm shift is indispensable. In this paper, an ecological perspective is presented corresponding to the assumption of a cultural posture that is aware of the dimension of otherness: this is an attempt to focus not on individuals as if they were separated from each other, but rather on the nature of vital boundaries between people and community, between the local and the global scale, and finally, between human beings, objects and places. Reuse as a transdisciplinary category will then be brought into focus. Good reuse practices can help generate or increase trust between humans as well as between them and their environment. As a resignification and re-invention strategy in the design process (Giuliani 2020; Schinco 2020), reuse can be seen as a tool to prevent the waste of soil and built heritage, promoting urban regeneration and social innovation (Caramel 2020) as well as a suitable approach to enhance the symbolic significance of places and involve people in engaging atmospheres.

2. Knowledge, relationships and otherness

English psycho-analyst Wilfred R. Bion, in his seminal work *Learning from Experience* (Bion 1962), formulated his own theory of thought and knowledge, starting from his clinical work with psychotic patients and other extreme contexts such as support groups for war veterans. He strongly emphasized that his theory had a value within the living relationship with

patients, i.e., a relational process strongly characterised at an emotional, affective and existential level. It was a tool for being in the relationship, as every theory should be. When a theory is divorced from the relationship and the vital process in which it makes sense, it becomes hypostatized in an unduly mechanistic whole in which the human subject remains imprisoned together with the false knowledge it generates. Bion expressed this as follows:

We assume that the psychotic limitation is due to an illness but that that of the scientist is not. Investigation of the assumption illuminates disease on the one hand and scientific method on the other. It appears that our rudimentary equipment for "thinking" thoughts is adequate when the problems are associated with the inanimate, but not when the object for investigation is the phenomenon of life itself. Confronted with the complexities of the human mind the analyst must be circumspect in following even accepted scientific method; its weakness may be closer to the weakness of psychotic thinking than superficial scrutiny would admit. (Bion 1962, authors' translation)

What we are interested in here is the irreverent analogy the author establishes between the psychotic way of thinking and that of the scientific community. In a superficial approach, it may seem that Bion rejected scientific thinking, but actually, it is quite the contrary. Not only the author resorts to logical-mathematical tools for developing his original method for monitoring the analytical process, but he also clarifies what he means by "weakness" of thought: it consists in not being able to withstand the impact of the truth. The epistemology underlying Bion's thought is oriented to truth, to the relationship with reality. Bion's criticism of scientific thought consists in pointing out the inadequacy of the latter to withstand the impact of the truth of what is alive and animate, thus confining it within a reductionist and mechanistic logic. It is not just a question of re-evaluating the emotional aspects of thought, but also of restoring the central role that relationships deserve if we want to deal with the reality of life. Only within the framework of relationships, and not treating them as "objects", do emotions and intentions acquire meaning and relevance. From the point of view of the construction of the self, the sense of the self and the sense of the other emerge together, as long as the parents, especially

the mother, are able to recognise the child as another, who bears instances, needs and emotional states that are independent of their own. The practice and constancy of this recognition allows the infant to conceive him/herself not only as a being, but as a subject, to exist as another. *Oneself as another*, in the suggestive definition of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1990).

Psychoanalysis highlighted how recognition of the other is the necessary condition for the proper functioning of thought. This acquisition, since it pertains to the original stages of human thought, has an overflowing heuristic power and soon goes beyond the boundaries of clinical psychology, deeply influencing the philosophical thought.

According to Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995), ethics, i.e., the questioning of good and evil in action, prevails over ontology, which is the questioning of the nature of being. This is because knowledge, starting from perception, always develops in relations, and the protagonists of relations are the faces that meet and look at each other. In looking at each other, the irreducibility of every human subject to the attempts of knowledge and categorisation by his/her interlocutor emerges. In every encounter that is not violent or falsifying, a tension towards the infinite is manifested: the fact that every other is "totally other" from me and from every experience we may have in common imposes itself. «The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mood does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me» (Lévinas 1961). Therefore, the only possibility of true knowledge is subject to respect for this otherness, which is, ultimately, love.

A similar position is that of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). According to Marcel, what we share with others is first and foremost corporeality: we "have" a body and also, we are that body. As in Lévinas, our thinking is characterised by transcendence, that is, by "going through" the experience. Transcendence is the manifestation of an irreducible otherness and originality; at the same time, corporeality is the manifestation of a radically communitarian existence. Both authors, although different, share the position that, if we want to preserve the community, we must recognise the difference implicit in every subjectivity and take care of it.

Recognising difference and caring for it guarantee the possibility of giving meaning to existence, a meaning that otherwise would deteriorate to the point of being completely lost.

Investigating the link between relationships and creativity through the lens of valuing the dream life, Schinco (2011) endorsed a position that echoes that of Lévinas and Marcel (Marcel 1935). Human existence, more than a "being there" in the sense postulated by Heidegger, i.e., a being impersonally "thrown" into circumstances and vicissitudes that situate and characterise every single existence, is a "being with someone". Indeed, at the existential level, the mere "being there", characterised by solitude towards the environment, entails despair and basic distrust. As clinical psychology showed us, this is because loneliness is not a fundamental condition of existence, but rather an absence that sucks meaning into nothingness, throws one into despair and invites one to engage in relationships aimed at dominating the other. Heidegger was keen on the topic of dwelling: well, we do not dwell alone, but dwell together.

Furthermore, Schinco (2015 and 2019) approached the reality of "being with someone" with an ethical connotation, that of good and evil manifestation or "emergence" depending on the way individuals, families and communities relate to each other on a daily basis. The conscious or unconscious thinking of others by objectifying, reifying and instrumentalizing them not only generates injustice but also slowly erodes the sense of existence, vitality and belonging. Finally, over time, it becomes the premise for real "systemic emergencies" or "epiphanies" of social and inner evil. On the contrary, the practice of a thought that respects the irreducible uniqueness of each other, and therefore the intrinsic subjectivity of everything that is not "me", makes authentic empathy be possible (Stein 1917) as well as the natural recognition that we are all different and literally invaluable, since there is no metric to categorise, compare and measure the value of each individual.

3. An ecological perspective

In front of populations devoured by wars, reckless extraction of resources, migration due to climate change and poverty, effects of the pandemic amplified by the sake of a financial and globalized profit, many scholars are dealing with our planet condition, describing our era as the *Anthropocene*. Haraway (2016), a prominent scholar in the field of science, technology and

socialist-feminist studies, has introduced the term *Chthulucene*, formed by the association of two Greek roots (*khthôn* and *kainos*), that indicates a typology of space-time necessary to stay responsibly in contact with living and dying on a damaged and wounded Earth. The meaning of *kainos* is *now*, the time of beginning, existing, progressing, the time of novelty. *Khthôn* refers to chthonian processes, which belong to Earth; they are at the same time ancient and new, they demonstrate and perform the material importance of terrestrial activities and of all creatures. According to Haraway, individualism in its different forms, biological, philosophical and political, is no longer a resource; it has become unthinkable and should be substituted by a tentacular thinking, which can be applied in different fields from science to anthropology to narrative.

Various researchers from different disciplinary fields consider it necessary to adopt an ecological perspective which allows humankind to take account of otherness intended as nature, i.e., other living species.

Bourriaud (2021), a curator and art critic active worldwide, in his *Inclusions* outlined an erudite and eclectic journey through history, philosophy, anthropology and the visual arts, highlighting the need for a shift in thought and practice that renews the traditional categories of humanism and helps interpret the current era of *Capitalocene*. Aiming at including the categories marginalised by Western and capitalist ideology, he focused on minorities, peoples considered "primitive", animals, plants and even molecules: in short, the living, in its broadest sense.

Mancuso went even further, arguing that to improve our lives we cannot help but be inspired by plants, since plants are sophisticated and evolved social organisms that offer the solution to many technological problems and are even much more resilient than animals. Plants have extraordinary adaptive capacities, can live in extreme environments, camouflage themselves to escape predators, move without consuming energy, produce chemical molecules with which they manipulate animals' and humans' behaviour.

Conceptually, considering nature as *other than human beings* is a result of an anthropocentric culture. In reality, humankind is nature and nature is humankind (Bonardi and Marini 2020). Global warming, soil consumption and rising seas are not natural phenomena, nor are they anthropogenic; they are something that has to do with the whole system which nature and hu-
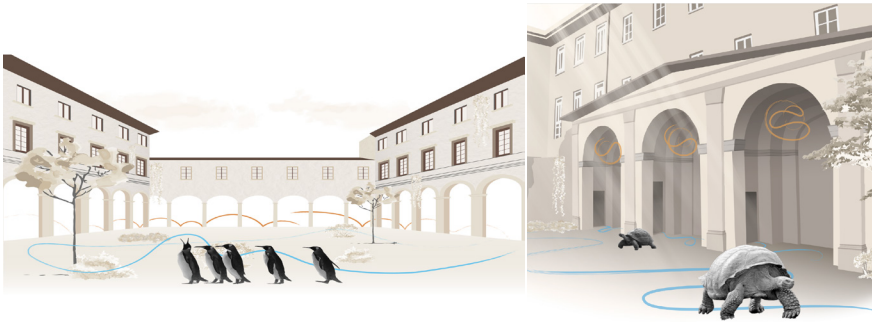
Figure 1. *Anumani*, Caselli C., Ciliberti E., D'Aleo G., Paggi M., Picasso G., Reati M., Vettoretti I.: reuse project of a historical building in Milan, Interior Design Studio, Design School, Politecnico di Milano, 2020.

man beings are a part of. There is a need to overcome the dualism and, above all, to think of the environment considering humankind not as separated from it but as a part of a complex and dynamic system. Places become emblematic elements of human habitation on Earth; by creating some places, people have often abandoned, destroyed, forgotten, submerged, supplanted, uprooted and regenerated other places. They are points in a network that coexist in different spaces and times, take different forms and meanings depending on the cultural perspective that reads and interprets them. Within the framework of an ecological perspective, it is important mentioning the contribution of Gregory Bateson (1904-1980), an anthropologist and pioneer of cybernetic thought, who also focused on meaning and difference through the quality of relationships, the importance of which has been mentioned above. Bateson (1972) made a very clear-cut statement: not only the community but also the ecosystem must be preserved; this is possible only by radically valuing difference, avoiding confusions – logical or involving the boundary between self and other – without a reifying and instrumental mentality that subjects the vastness of being to the claims of the self, be it individual, group or society. As individuals we are distinct, Bateson warns us, not separate. Thus, Bateson's reasoning, in line with the systemic and cybernetic epistemology underlying it, is circular in nature: preserving the community and the ecosystem in turn promotes and protects difference, triggering and facilitating development in an epigenetic perspective. It is worth recalling that the original meaning of *epigenesis* consists precisely in the differentiation and organization of growth.

4. Reuse and otherness

In the past the reuse of buildings was dictated by practical reasons such as supplying building materials, while today the reuse of existing buildings is often supported by ethical reasons like the attempt to limit soil consumption and the desire to keep alive a bond with the past (Anzani and Caramel 2020).

Indeed, human evolution unfolds not only through the recovery and enhancement of what is already ruined. When guided by realistic and nature-oriented thinking, it also recovers and revitalises that which has been generated by evil or is deeply imbued with it. Since none of the places or cities we have generated over time are characterised by complete innocence, this perspective is a state of necessity that requires us to react responsibly. Epigenesis also takes on a new appearance. Dealing with abandoned and decayed buildings conveys experiences of otherness, related to a distance in time, constructive techniques and functions that are different from contemporary needs and taste. In historical contexts, interior design projects should confront with the recognized meaning of existing buildings. Indeed, the delicate relationship between the new and the old can result into their reciprocal enhancement or, conversely, into the prevalence of one over the other, where the existing structure is often placed in the background and interpreted exclusively as a scenic backdrop. The reuse of an existing building should be supported by the recognition of the added value that it is able to offer compared to a new construction, thanks to its historical and material stratification.

4.1. *Urban regeneration and social innovation*

Industrialisation of Western countries, with the illusion of an apparently unlimited growth possibility (Latouche 2012), has introduced the concept of obsolescence and replacement, in contrast to repair, which is reflected by a constant process of urbanisation and cementification of the natural environments. Still pervaded by the illuminist concept of order, our cities are dismissing all that which does not respond to an economic imperative, based on the value of land and built assets (Guglielmi 2021). Therefore, post-industrial cities are marked by the presence of underutilised complexes, characterised by palimpsests of memory and values that often cannot be identified nor became a shared community heritage.

The need for spaces where to carry out their activities has always posed the human beings in the face of a complex relationship with existing architectures. In the past, the reuse of buildings was a natural process of functional and spatial "updating" (Sette 2001); after the nineteenth century, the recognition of a historical and cultural value of existing assets has progressively redefined this practice.

In recent years, cultural heritage has been considered a driver for urban regeneration in many historical centres, not only through the functional reuse of historical sites but also as a means to enhance a sense of local identity, social inclusion and public well-being. Following the ICOMOS Declaration of Amsterdam in 1975, which introduced the notion of "integrated conservation", the importance of heritage conservation for the sake of local identity was highlighted and subsequently reaffirmed by other international Charters.

The preservation of the material values of historic towns, which are morphology, formal appearance, relationship between the town and its surrounding setting, and functionalities, were brought into focus, and the notion of "historic urban landscape" was introduced in relation to world heritage. In recent decades, using heritage as a catalyst for urban regeneration has been common practice in historic cities all over the world and specific attention has been addressed to intangible values, natural landscape and topography in relation to the built fabric, sustainable development and involvement of local communities (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019).

Design approaches focused on emotional and multisensory experience could give value not only to a functional but also to an experiential use of places. The challenge is returning dismissed areas to new use possibilities, relying on temporary and reversible strategies consistent with the place nature and soul, aimed at their reintegration into the living social fabric and the enhancement of their symbolic significance.

Decommissioned buildings, no longer considered as random or isolated facts, may constitute a starting point for overcoming the now unsustainable binary logic that divides the territory into urbanised and non-urbanised. The peculiarities of dismissed urban areas, most often "frayed" compared to the regular urban extension and distributed over the territory apparently with no rules, as a result of their abandonment, become possible models capable of recreating new physical and social aggregations, starting precisely

from their degree of inhomogeneity. The use of self-similarity rules, i.e., the recurrence of similar forms on different scales, derived from fractal mathematics present in nature, art, architecture and in the territory, can be seen as a new approach to the design for disused buildings, recovering identity values, collective history as memory and, in many cases, even the forgotten "Genius loci" (Guglielmi 2021).

Different cities experience processes of requalification of disused productive buildings. One of the most significant urban conversion projects in Europe is BASE, a former 12,000 square meters electromechanical factory, today transformed into a cultural production place used for workshops, exhibitions, conferences, bistro, study rooms and artist residences (Di Prete 2020). Another significant example in Italy is the Farm Cultural Park in Favara, a small town in Sicily, where some abandoned buildings have been redesigned according to pop and contemporary aesthetics to host designers of all nationalities for conferences, events, lectures, reversing the economic crisis and the lack of human resources (Invernizzi 2020).

Riusiamo l'Italia is a road book based on researches into good practices for reusing spaces. Italy is "full of empty spaces" which, if reused by cultural and social start-ups, could become a low-cost lever to promote youth employability. This kind of bottom-up action could contribute to the development of the country, starting again from those artistic, creative, cultural and craft "vocations" that have made Italy appreciated throughout the world and that are of interest to young people today, who are increasingly able to re-interpret them on the basis of contemporary paradigms.

Another interesting example is the regeneration of the former mining site of Winterslag in Genk into a creative hub which houses a school of art and design, an incubator for young entrepreneurs, a cinema, a cultural centre, an art gallery and a museum. Genk is an industrial city that developed in the early twentieth century thanks to its mining industry. After the mines were closed in the 1980s, the city was confronted with large unemployment but also with the question of how to deal with the built relics of the mining industry and with its surrounding landscape. Even more than a driver for the economic development of Genk, the intervention is intended to become a new centre for the city and a key element in the formation of its renewed identity (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019).

Regeneration can be implemented not only through the reuse of historical buildings but also through the preservation and reactivation of intangible aspects, such as traditions, craftsmanship or local narratives, and through the restoration and upgrading of the natural landscape. Moreover, adaptive reuse as a tool to strengthen a sense of continuity and local identity is applied not only to heritage buildings but also to all sorts of buildings that are currently not considered to have any architectural or historical value, nonetheless are retained for social, ecological or pragmatic reasons (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019).

4.2. Place attachment

According to La Cecla (1988), perceiving a gap between us and our surroundings, a solution of continuity, a discrepancy, an altered balance between our body and the space is equivalent to feeling lost and can provoke a "vertigo". One finds oneself caught between an expectation of familiarity, affective adherence or understanding with a place, and a contrary input coming from the place itself. Otherness in this case corresponds to a discomfort linked to a place that we cannot feel or make our own: our body expects an affinity with surrounding physical presences but this is denied, the world around us becomes ambiguous and unbearable, dangerous and insignificant. Just as the body, the individual place of memory, can be the site of blockages and suffering, so the city, the collective place of memory, can be the site of disorientation (Anzani and Caramel 2015).

Place attachment seems to be a universal phenomenon. According to French philosopher Simone Weil, «to be rooted is the most important and least recognised need of the human soul» (Weil 1954). As a consequence, disruption of attachment through forced relocation may have severe psychological and health consequences (Lewicka 2014).

Growing empirical and conceptual studies of embodied cognition have supported the idea that the way we perceive, experience, learn and think depends on the kind of body we have and the ways we interact with our physical and social environments and therefore, with architectural and urban spaces (Mallgrave 2013). Built environments are not simply architectural products or aesthetic artefacts but are part of affective social relationships and embodied cognition, can produce a sense of orientation and belonging (Mallgrave 2013).

In a time when constant movements and changes produce an increasing state of alienation, historical places can create a sense of continuity with the past, embody a group's traditions and facilitate place attachment, intensified by awareness of the place history (Lewicka 2008). We hypothesize that this phenomenon can be traced back to the broader theme of the sense of trust. Good reuse practices can help generate or increase trust between humans and between them and their environment. Reuse of existing buildings may be seen as an opportunity to dwell in a previously inhabited space and to restore a sense of belonging to a community.

5. Conclusions

The concept of obsolescence and replacement, introduced by industrialisation in contrast to repair and reflected by a constant process of urbanisation and cemented environments, should be overcome as an anachronistic expression of the only apparently unlimited growth of Western countries (Latouche 2012), hinged on the centrality of the individual consumers stuck in unceasing competition with others and in the effort to control them.

An ecological perspective should be adopted, corresponding to the assumption of a cultural posture that is aware of the dimension of otherness: this is an attempt to focus not on individuals as if they were separated from each other, but rather on the nature of vital boundaries between people and community, between local and global scale, finally between human beings, objects and places.

Reusing existing buildings and maintaining the historic character of a community, as well as adopting minimal intervention criteria, hybridization and reversible approaches may enhance the local identity, bring redevelopment, heritage tourism, restore a sense of belonging to a community and favour physical and psychological comfort.

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The Landscape between Identity and Alterity
For an Atmosphere Design

> Finding words for what is before our eyes: how difficult it can be.
> But when they arrive, then it is as if they hit with little hammer
> blows against the surface of reality...
>
> Walter Benjamin, *San Gimignano*

1. The landscape as an atmosphere

The *atmosphere* of landscapes[1] is linked to places: more evidently it relates to the memories and identities of the communities that have shared stories and cultures there. But on closer inspection it is easy to understand how it is closely linked to "otherness", to "hybrid" and less evident cultural evolutions that leave *different* marks on the territory. The first chapter of this intervention proposes reflections on the relationship between *cultural landscape and atmosphere*, understood as a threshold for accessing the identities and otherness of territories. The aim is to provide design indications for communication design that deals with describing territories, in their cultural complexity, through perceptive points of view, visual languages and different narrative insights. The in-depth analysis, in the following chapters, concerns the atmospheres of the landscapes which, due to their changeable, impressive and subjective nature, do not highlight a prevailing territorial identity, nor a single cultural or emotional point of view. Rather they consist of a colourful gallery of instantaneous representations, which establishes an interesting visual vocabulary of landscape otherness, or of relationships between subjective emotional spaces and the environment.

The second part is dedicated to the state of the art and to the analysis of case studies.

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[1] Council of Europe Landscape Convention: <https://rm.coe.int/1680080621>, online on 31 December 2023.

The third and final part presents a design experimentation that uses images of atmospheric contents, starting from literary descriptions, as a *hybrid* writing system, which evolves from illustrated notations and text.

In conclusion, the research initiates a possible theoretical framework where the atmosphere manifests itself as *spatial otherness* (Deleuze [1966] 2001).

1.1. *Landscapes*

Many years have passed since the *European Landscape Convention* was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, the first international treaty dedicated to the European landscape. According to the Convention (Chap. 1. Art. 1.a – Definitions), the «"Landscape" means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors».

The landscape is therefore: «an essential component in the life of people, an expression of the diversity of their common cultural and natural heritage and foundation of their identity» (Chap. 2. Art. 5.a – General provisions).

In general, social, cultural and political evolution has contributed to further defining modern landscapes as containers of "super-diversity"; not static, but changing, from a predominantly multicultural context. The different roots and traditions, co-present in the collective environmental heritage, elude the possibility of circumscribing uniform and constant socio-environmental characteristics, on the contrary they develop *hybridizations and mutations*:

a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade. (Vertovec 2007)

The experience of the landscape is therefore influenced by a multitude of points of view and cultural patterns; it is a «socio-culturally produced object» (Galasso 2018: 141) in which historical social identities and otherness are mutually complementary synergistic expressions. *Cultural patterns*, precisely because of their heterogeneity, can give rise to a carousel of shapes and impressions that manifest *atmospheres* that are at times

familiar and at times extraneous to the dominant "domestic aesthetic". Taken together, they define a sort of *environmental aesthetic*, identifiable and recognizable from the first exploration (Lynch [1960] 1969), but dependent on cultural variables and subjectivity and therefore changeable. We will call the structured system of possible portrayals of the same place *atmospheric otherness*.

Associating the cultural otherness of the landscapes with the summation of the different atmospheric impressions refers to the Gestalt perceptual principle which organizes the meanings of the single parts into expressive categories of the whole. The atmosphere of the landscapes expresses impressive transitory qualities capable of continuously *redefining* the overall aesthetics of the places, albeit tenaciously based on *invariant*, geographical, physical and symbolic *properties*. The ensemble of atmospheres is the "paradigmatic landscape", a synthesis of the many othernesses. A synthesis that considers every part, every atmospheric instant, indispensable for establishing the overall meaning. The atmospheres of a landscape therefore have interesting characteristics; the ensemble of points of view is an ensemble of otherness and the ensemble of atmospheric depictions defines the *aesthetics* of *cultural iconographies*.

The atmosphere can be perceived from a distance, without crossing the places, observing them from afar. The simple "embrace with a gaze" a panorama, can immerse in the *atmospheric sense* (Griffero 2013: 129). But perception is projective and synaesthetic, *almost tactile*, even when observing a pictorial landscape or a photographic image (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 2003). In a sort of increasingly abstract involvement, even the "mental" image of literary places is formed with "atmospheric" attributes that refer to other known places. It is a sense effect, generated by literary descriptions, which draws from the memory of other places to form itself.

«The atmosphere of a city supervenes on the urban materiality» (Griffero 2014: 21) and landscapes manifest themselves in the vocation of «[...] activators of memories, capable of bringing back experiences, relationships, social dynamics, facts of public relevance and daily practices» (Cattunar 2014: 2). In fact, the atmosphere mainly involves this mnemic and at the same time aesthetic dimension: it is defined as a "spatial feeling" as a «specific emotional quality of a "lived-in space"» that some places express better than others, or in a different way (Griffero [2010] 2017: 43).

In other words, the landscape activates an atmospheric connective of memories, symbolic figurations, visual characters, and this happens even when its mere description, iconographic or textual, is considered. In fact, even a description returns a multitude of representable imaginative meanings, translatable into visual and shareable languages.

The epistemology concerned with narrative (Lancioni 2009) highlights how literature as a whole constitutes a sort of unconscious "atlas of imagined places" favoured by the «imageability of texts» (Bertrand 2002: 99). Places whose atmosphere preserves the explicit references of the landscape, or implicit in the memories of that landscape, to then offer itself as *air that fills the space*, immersing itself in a subjectivity that interprets.

According to Griffero, «... the descriptions of urban spaces offered both by August Endell in 1908 and, more recently, by Kevin Lynch in his environmental investigations based on the notion of "*imageability*", i.e. the urban quality perceived, independently of cartographic objectivity and resulting from the encounter between the subject and certain objective qualities can be considered atmospheric» (Griffero [2010] 2017: 93). Landscapes are therefore structured systems that refer to other memories and other spaces: they are *living hypertexts* with a superficial structure, referring to the immediacy of the whole image, and a deeper one that intertwines memories (Calabi 2009).

The score of the historical layout of the landscape (or of its *mnemic* gaps or *amnesias*) nourishes the forms of the atmosphere. The otherness of differences and transformations is juxtaposed to the autochthonous identities that share memories, values and narratives. The identities are recognized as stratified in the landscape system as, rooted and solid, they coincide with the values integrated in the collective expressions. Othernesses, on the other hand, represent "super-diverse" values, alternations, differences; they build the atmospheric landscapes and influence the observer's feelings.

If identity and otherness are understood as synergistic "cultural dimensions" and in relation to each other, with nature and with the history of places, they both also belong to the spatial, geographical and anthropic dimension of landscapes. Overlapping, they signify the landscape and determine its atmospheres, their recognizability, the sense of belonging or extraneousness; the same concept of *dwelling* feeds on the relationship

between identity, otherness, space and time (Leccardi et al. 2011). For this reason, the landscape is recognized as a "perceptive phenomenon" that belongs to the field of *aesthetic experiences* (D'Angelo 2001).

The dystunity between cultural othernesses has a historical role and has left legible signs in the shape of landscapes. They host cultures with different styles, shapes, relationships and their *appearances* involve more than bodily sensations. Indeed, landscapes generate an involvement of *aesthetic empathy*; a sort of «affective situation, meaning by this the fact of feeling in which environment one finds oneself» (Böhme 2001: 64, author's translation).

The experience of an atmosphere is then *implicitly* aesthetic because it refers to consciousness, experience, emotions and sensations; because it activates bodily, haptic and proprioceptive perceptions typical of *immersion* in a space (Gander 1999). The term «haptic» (Panofsky [1961] 1989) refers to the meaning of "tangible", meaning an extended touch on forms and in space, synesthetic, which involves the entire organism. The body reacts by tuning in to the stimuli, as if "invaded" by environmental perceptions.

The depth of the atmospheric experience and its value as an emotional tool can redefine visual languages and hierarchies of meaning in communicating the characteristics of a place. By dissociating itself from the stereotypes that value identity representations for promotional purposes, the design of the atmospheres can translate the different points of view, the cultural otherness, the different narrative versions.

In summary, some open questions can be found on the planning level of the communication design of the identities and otherness of the landscapes.

The first concerns the use of atmospheric representations in the construction of a palimpsest of fragments of memories and narratives that coincide with the prevailing identities. The second highlights the value of the different points of view that generate "atmospheric othernesses". Other issues concern the value of a design of atmospheres, to restore spaces of meaning and strengthen the sense of belonging and home, beyond the prevailing shared identities.

1.2. Atmospheric effects

The atmospheric experience allows us to hypothesize some definitions of *atmospheric effect*. They include: the atmospheric phenomena that take place in a given moment of time, which alter the climate and which can

be the object of emotional interpretations; the "spatial identities", which are symbolic, memory and cultural references scattered in the landscape; the "otherness" which include the transformations, the cultural mixtures, the divergences from the identity references which generate dissimilar atmospheric points of view.

Having ascertained that the perception of an atmospheric effect determines "aesthetic relationships" that can influence emotional states (Catalano 2020), those involved can access, in personal resonance or dissonance, the cultures of the places (Jedlowski 1989), the transformations and emotions aroused by atmospheric effects. The landscape then offers itself as «a space in which one enters just like one enters a state of mind» (Catalano 2020: 44) and becomes an area of otherness, i.e. of the unexpected, of discovery, of the relationships between sequences of points of view and representations. In fact, each organizes the references widespread in the landscape, favouring some traces over others and determining predominance of meaning. These predominances emerge semantically from the whole, but at the same time they allow us to glimpse other experiences and other realities with respect to the recognized ones.

We have mentioned two types of "aesthetic atmospheric involvement": one is direct, in presence, belongs to real three-dimensional space and generates cognitive and emotional experiences based on own-bodily processes. The other type is indirect, i.e. it takes place through portrayals (artistic, iconographic, textual, sound), that is through "other" narratives where the *sense of presence* (which is realized by portraying oneself *immersed* in those places) is given by the *imageability* of the content, i.e. from its possibility of being imagined by appealing to one's own experience and by similarities.

In both typological cases, identity and otherness combine to define the atmospheric effects, influencing subjective reactions with naturalness and unconscious immediacy.

It should be made clearer that the atmosphere is not "generated" by the attitude of the observer. In fact, it maintains a structure that arises from environmental characteristics and that is constant for everyone, despite the fact that situations and looks can change. In other words, the atmosphere brings with it "stable" information starting from the physical elements of the landscape, which then take on symbolic and conventional meanings that guide the understanding of the signs, such as «affordance»

(Griffero 2013: 129) for the interpretation of the landscape. In addition to the stable signs, the inferences and emotional interpretations of the observer are found and forcefully emerge in the atmospheric representations, so at the same time the indefinite relationships of otherness with which every subjectivity is imbued participate. An example of subjective interpretation is the unconscious search for the sensations that somehow make the environment familiar, transmitting the security of *domesticity* (a strictly personal and different concept for each one). Another example is that of the atmospheric effect of a sunset in nature in the absence of cultural references; on average it inspires the same feeling and involvement in all people. In this case, the visual representation can certainly be lyrical and pay homage to the personal imagination, but it does not reverberate either identity or otherness: it is what the observer expects. However, when in the atmosphere of that natural landscape artistic, symbolic, traces or cultural references become recognizable, even for a single element, everything changes. Then Cittanova on the Via Emilia becomes a container of *other* atmospheres (Luigi Ghirri, *Cittanova*, 1985), such as the Cathédrales de Rouen (Claude Monet, *Série des Cathédrales de Rouen, Effet du matin/à midi/plein soleil*, 1893-1894, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) or the Central Station of Milan (Anna Maria Ortese, *Silenzio a Milano*, 2002). Those cultural signs of identity and otherness are indices that identify a network of symbolic and cultural relationships, in which the sense of extraneousness is mitigated in the familiar and becomes a subjective emotional space.

«The identity of a landscape is given by its singular atmosphere and having experience of it, that is, managing to perceive it in its fullness, means having the possibility of respecting it in its unrepeatable uniqueness» (Catalano 2020: 181).

The character of the atmosphere arises from the correspondence between the environment and the observer with a precise and sensitive availability for *immersive involvement*, in the landscape and in one's own «affective states» (Griffero 2016: 21). These are essentially those personal affective states that make the image of cities different for everyone.

The atmospheric experience of a landscape immediately engages: the perceptive discriminant; the cognitive dimension; the individual self. It is not a process but an imaginative experience, which interprets the place with im-

mediate reactions. Different cultures, identities, layered transformations, weather and otherness translate into bodily and emotional impressions. The genesis of the *first impression* (Griffero 2009) of a landscape is therefore conditioned by *transmutations*: every time something changes and emerges, it dissociates itself from identity and becomes other than itself. The moment changes, the mood changes, the impact changes and the cultural meanings change; involvement in the forms of the landscape and the mnemic process of references to the memories of one's own experience remains constant. Othernesses that gradually materialize against the backdrop of stratified and evolving identities, in cultural connotations from which atmospheres are determined and new oscillations between identity and otherness develop. Perception is selective and therefore does not consider all the parts that offer themselves to the gaze on the same level, rather orienting itself towards choices of a practical nature that can combine impressions. Therefore the atmosphere materializes as an expression of the relationship between the observer and the landscape, between the known and the unknown, between identity and otherness and allows an *experiential orientation* between the infinite number of points of view. Meanwhile, the landscape is configured as a "phenomenal object", that is, as the place of *atmospheric effects*, where they are perceived and take on meaning.

The landscape «condenses within itself the relations of the society-space-time system» (Fiorani 2005: 9) and is defined in its cultural and aesthetic substance; while the "atmospheric effect" selects the semantic characters and turns them into emotions.

Referring to the city, to its "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007) and cultural otherness, the atmosphere is configured with a set of engaging parameters and signifiers of particular attractiveness; that is, multicultural landscapes possess an iridescent «atmospheric charge» (Griffero [2010] 2017: 91).

Landscapes are special generators of signifiers and for this reason their artistic representations have contributed to the creation of an aesthetic recognizable as a historical, cultural and symbolic heritage of civilizations, in the visual arts as in literature.

While the landscape offers itself in an atmospheric form, the interpretation translates the symbolic emergences of the area into expressions, into expressive languages, into "topographical texts" (Assmann 1997) with a shared meaning.

Then the link between people and places can be strengthened, if not conceived and created, when the translation of the co-present, and different, atmospheric narratives of the landscape, into communicative forms that can be shared between cultural identities and otherness, becomes possible. Atmospheric effects prove to be instruments of cultural sharing.

2. Spatial otherness. Case studies

> The well-known list of the seven deadly sins linked pride to Genoa, avarice to Florence (the ancient Germans were of a different opinion and called what is known as Greek love "Florenzen"), voluptuousness to Venice, anger to Bologna, gluttony to Milan, envy to Rome and laziness to Naples.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *Images of cities*

We have seen how landscapes are simultaneously containers of identity and otherness, which emerge as significant elements from the atmospheres of urban landscapes and points of view. They play a fundamental role in building collective awareness starting from explicit memories, which generate awareness and a sense of belonging. The absence of memory is the absence of identity, just as the absence of subjectivity is the deprivation of otherness. For this reason, design, which sets itself the task of giving new meaning to places through the communication of cultures and memories, finds a way of making forgotten and different realities available, gathering new visions and following-up the analysis of archival materials. Materials that constitute a wealth of points of view, which can be activated in the geographical space. *Spatializing memories* means relocating them in the landscape so that they can act as collectors of identities.

The design scope does not end with the placement of geographic coordinate markers; its function is maieutic and allows atmospheres to be imagined in a predictive sense, like a tourist guide foreshadows the destination: it supports dissemination activities, defines points of interest, languages and narrative paradigms. Communicating today means defining relational spaces; the communication design of areas reveals otherwise inaccessible relationships, to promote cultures. Even through atmospheric representation, the purpose of design is to act as a pedagogical tool of cultural diffusion.

Paesaggio urbano

Segni visivi e sonori del cambiamento atmosferico dello spazio urbano

Segni visivi e sonori storici e culturali dello spazio urbano

Effetti atmosferici — — — **Alterità spazializzate**

Segni visivi e sonori del cambiamento atmosferico dello spazio naturale

Segni visivi e sonori, elementi del paesaggio naturale geolocalizzati

Paesaggio naturale

Figure 1. Organization of the atmospheric signs in the Urban/Natural Landscape polarity and Natural Atmospheric Effects/Spatial Otherness.

For the designer, interfacing with a landscape means first of all experiencing it; the decoding of the atmospheric space is a further step in the cognitive direction. Identity and cultural otherness are not opposed but synergistic; the communication of urban landscapes cannot be limited to a representation "by contrasts": I and the Other, the subject and the object. It rather opens up to the prospects of super-diversity, of contamination of signs, verbal and visual multi-writings that require as many design, engaging and experiential approaches, capable of expressing contents accessible to co-presence.

Starting from an "access point", design initiates a transmedia translation (Ciastellardi 2017), a narration that selects the original narrative patterns (memories and images that belong to the real dimension) to produce new dialogical atmospheric effects. Design is therefore a descriptor, a *narrative* and proceeds by returning experiential devices through the shaping of immersive, but also transformative and participatory artefacts, which provide exciting and impressive representations of the landscape. It is a question of considering the atmospheric representation as a further tool

Paesaggio urbano

- Strolling Cities
- City Stories

Effetti atmosferici — **Alterità spazializzate**

POPP-Breizh   Far away   Far away   Re-Cordis
from far away   from far away

- Le Voyage Azarien
- Vacua Moenia
- Sanctuaries of Silence

Paesaggio naturale
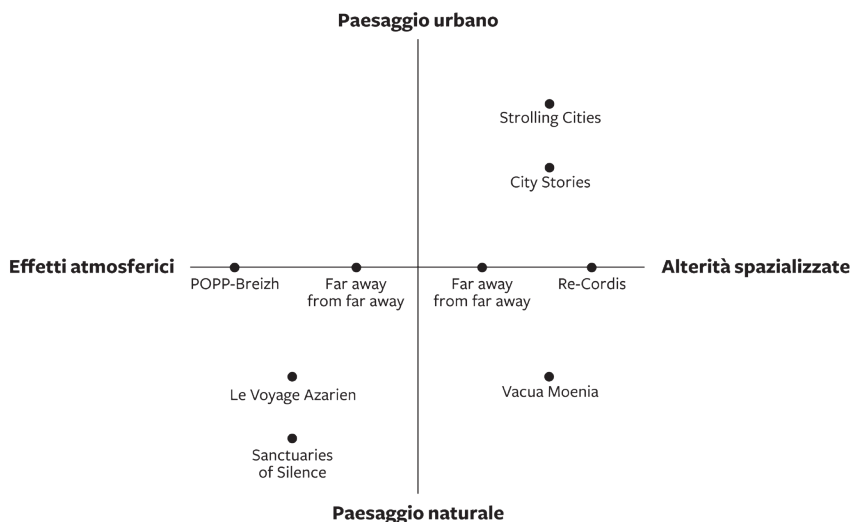
Figure 2. Organization of the case studies in the defined polarities.

for writing the emotion and aesthetics of places, whose characteristic is to convey contents with immediacy.

Some communication formats oriented towards the communication of landscape features (natural or urban) have been selected and analysed, which use an effective visual representation to immerse in the atmospheric effects and communicate cultural otherness. This representation takes place above all for the interconnection between images and sounds and is structured with the use of interactive immersive tools such as navigable image galleries, videos, virtual tours, animations, ambient sounds.

The case studies were analysed in landscapes from natural to urban, by types of languages used and contents. The "natural atmospheric effect" (without cultural symbolic references) was placed on the one hand and the presence of "spatial otherness" (with cultural symbolic references) on the other. The characters emerging from the case studies, placed in a Cartesian space, have been arranged according to the aesthetic prevalence of contents with a marked environmental atmospheric effect, or due to the presence of cultural symbols.

Strolling Cities – the artificial intelligence that generates urban landscapes from words – is placed in communication formats that represent the atmospheres of landscapes to enhance mnemic contents. The project
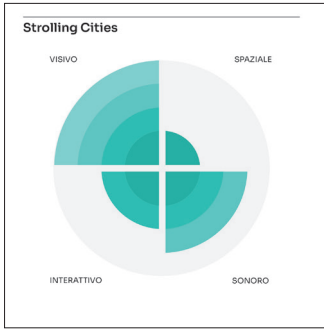
was developed by Mauro Martino, with the collaboration of ACTLAB (Politecnico di Milano) and exhibited in the Italian Hall of the 2021 Venice Biennale as an experiment in *visual poetry* generated by artificial intelligence. Ten important Italian cities (Venice, Como, Milan, Genoa, Bergamo, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Catania, Palermo) are illustrated with images collected during the 2020 pandemic. The original photographic images have been reworked

with MindEarth software, so as to develop a continuous and immersive atmospheric visual text, in which urban views merge, while a voiceover recites a literary text.

Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: photographic timelapse, 360 exploration, VR, sound effects, audio.
Visual rendering: high, full screen images in smooth overlay.
Spatial rendering: environmental panoramic images, not georeferenced.
Sound rendering: high, narrative voice, association with literary texts.
Level of interactivity: low.
Type: website.

2.2. POPP-Breizh, *Plateforme des Observatoires Photographiques du Paysage de Bretagne*
<http://popp-breizh.fr/public/popp>
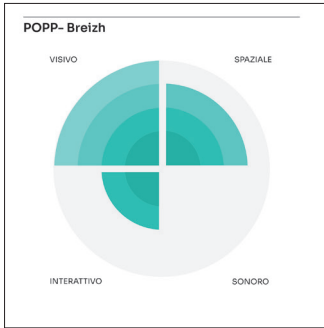
POPP-Breizh aims to depict atmospheric phenomena. It is an iconographic research of panoramas and environmental details on the Breton coasts.

The cartographic platform collects instantaneous images from the same observation point at regular intervals of time, thus building a special observatory of photographic memories. Environmental atmospheric effects are highlighted and urban space is referenced via map representation.
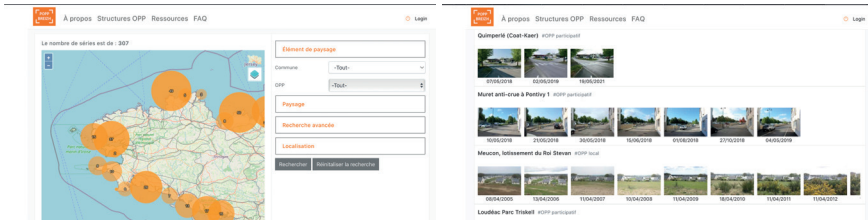
Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: cartographic exploration, image galleries, photographic, fixed shot.
Visual rendering: high, photographic.
Spatial rendering: georeferenced references.
Sound rendering: low or absent.
Level of interactivity: low.
Type: online digital observatory.

2.3. The Blue Skies Project, Anton Kusters
<https://antonkusters.com/The-Blue-Skies-Project>

The Blue Skies Project places itself in communication formats that aim to represent, in space and time, natural atmospheric phenomena. It is an installation of 1,068 instant colour photographs that frame the sky. The author introduces an atmospheric sequence disconnected from recognizable visual references but georeferenced. These are representations of the skies above the European death camps; they are described by a narrator.

The project abstracts the historical contents from the atmospheric dimension and does not spatialize them directly, that is, it does not visually anchor them to the places. The communicative rhetoric shifts attention to the natural atmospheric effects, so that the images appear separated from the plane of georeferenced mnemic contents.
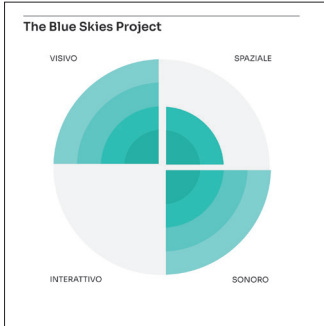
Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: sequence of photographic images.
Visual rendering: high.
Spatial rendering: georeferenced references.
Sound rendering: high, narrative voice.
Level of interactivity: low.
Type: installation.

2.4. Vacua Moenia
<https://www.vacuamoenia.net/>

Vacua Moenia is an archive of photographs and sounds that aims to represent the atmosphere of the rural areas of the Sicilian hinterland. The name, which means "empty walls", refers to the sounds of the abandoned places. It is an interdisciplinary project (acoustic ecology, landscape history, mnemic values, historical archives). Atmospheres are fundamentally sound and visual. The atmospheric sounds are georeferenced and referred to mnemic presences: images of ruins that document the state of the places.
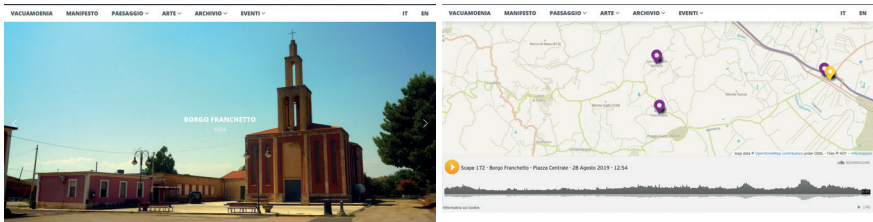
Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: environmental sounds, photography, interactive exploration.
Visual rendering: high, photographic.
Spatial rendering: georeferenced references.
Sound rendering: high, environmental sounds.
Level of interactivity: low.
Type: website.

2.5. Santctuaries of Silence
<https://sanctuariesofsilence.com/>

Sanctuaries of Silence, 2020 – an immersive listening journey is a project that is placed in the communication formats that represent the natural atmos-

pheres of the landscape. The project is by Adam Loften and Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee. It defines itself as a «documentary container in virtual reality», which allows the *Hoh Rainforest*, Olympic National Park in Washington, to be explored. The exploration path is divided between the "silent atmospheres" of nature, with the guide Gordon Hempton, an expert in acoustic ecology. The dialectic juxtaposition between environmental sounds and silences immerses you in the ex-
plorable atmospheres of the landscape. The *Stories* and *Lessons* sections expand upon emotional linguistic rhetoric with engaging interactive videos.
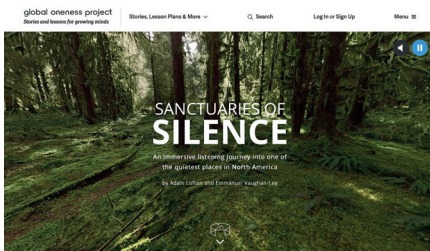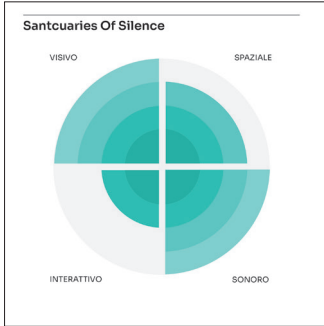
Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: environmental sound effects, 360 degree exploration, VR.
Visual rendering: high, 360-degree spherical images.
Spatial rendering: environmental panoramic images not georeferenced.
Sound rendering: high, environmental sounds.
Level of interactivity: high.
Type: website.

2.6. Re-Cordis Collage
<https://futuroarcaico.it/opere/re-cordis-collage>
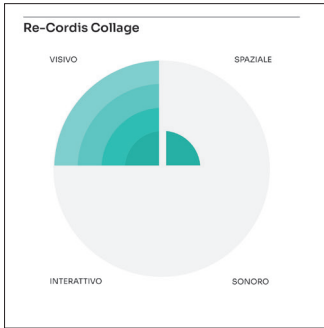
Re-Cordis Collage is to be found among communication formats that represent the atmospheres of cultural and natural landscapes, with the aim of enhancing mnemic contents. The project dialectically puts together past and present, superimposing them, to the point of confusing them, through a collage of images. It detaches itself from the dimension of the natural atmospheric phenomenon to build a narrative that proceeds by enhancing the domestic atmosphere, made up of family stories and memories.

Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: photographic collage.
Visual rendering: high, composition of images.
Spatial rendering: images not georeferenced.
Sound rendering: low, absent.
Level of interactivity: low.
Type: website.

2.7. City Stories: Mapping the Narratives of Singapore's Landscapes
<http://citystories.sg>

City Stories is to be found in communication formats that represent the atmosphere of urban landscapes to enhance mnemic content.

The platform shows the multicultural evolution of two places in the city of Singapore (Telok Ayer and Amoy Streets) with visualization alternatives: *street view* (linear photographic reconstruction of the two streets); *map view* (georeferenced in the urban fabric). A further level of audio-video study proceeds by historical steps.
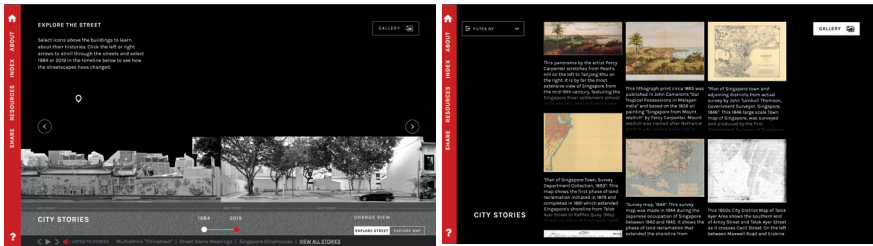
Assessment of atmospheric factors

Languages and technologies: sound effects, photography, map exploration, video.

Visual rendering: high, photographic reconstruction of the routes.

Spatial rendering: high, georeferenced environmental images.

Sound rendering: average, in-depth audio tracks.

Level of interactivity: average.

Type: website.

2.8. Far Away From Far Away
<https://faraway.nfb.ca>
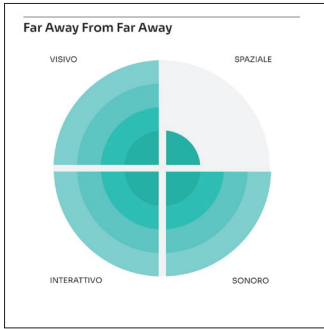
Far Away From Far Away is to be found in communication formats that represent landscapes through natural atmospheric phenomena. The project is an interactive prose journey in thirty-six chapters, created with the contribution of the inhabitants of Fogo Island, Newfoundland. The atmospheric representation of collective memories makes use of images and audio. The particular visual narrative choice is independent of any geographical location and therefore mainly renders the effect of natural atmospheric phenomena; at the same time, the narrative voice details the collective memories.

Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: video, sound effects.
Visual rendering: high, user-controlled images and videos.
Spatial rendering: environmental images not georeferenced.
Sound rendering: high, in-depth audio tracks, narrative voice.
Level of interactivity: high.
Type: website.

2.9. Le Voyage Azarien
<https://le-voyage-azarien.art>

This last case study differs substantially from the previous ones because the landscapes are artificial, modelled by the author Joseph Azar. The landscape is the background to the reflections on the forest. *Le Voyage Azarien* renders a particular atmospheric, dreamlike and unreal effect.
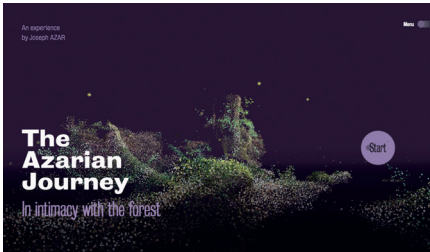
Assessment of atmospheric factors
Languages and technologies: 3D lidar technology, sound effects.
Visual rendering: high, dreamlike 3D immersion in space.
Spatial rendering: loss of perception of the real landscape.
Sound rendering: high, in-depth audio tracks, narrative voice.
Level of interactivity: high.
Type: website.

3. Atmospheric narratives of Design. Conclusions

> The Station, walls, marbles, columns, vaults, stairways, and again vaults and halls like frozen rivers, seemed to have lost all weight, all gravity, its own gloomy air: it was a delicate and rigid woodcutting.
>
> Anna Maria Ortese, "One night at the station",
> in *Silenzio a Milano* (1958)

The communication of the cultural landscape and its atmospheric representations is an *aesthetic work*. Recognizing aesthetics as a *science of perceivable knowledge*, atmospheres are, therefore, a task that belongs to design (Böhme 2001: 27, 64).

In the designs of the otherness of areas, as in the pictorial, photographic, literary representations, it is the iconographic characters arranged in the *frame* that become part of the atmospheres of a landscape which, from a background, translates into an imaginary space «endowed with spiritual characters that allow it to interact with human events» (Catalano 2020: 185). In many case studies, it has been seen that the atmosphere represents natural landscapes and atmospheric phenomena, where the visual and sound content reproduces the environmental effect. In other cases, some suitably selected elements, such as rural ruins and "tears" in the urban fabric, invent frames that become an *atmospheric point of access* to cultural identities and otherness. The "figurative narrative" is able to make the *otherness of literary places* imaginable but, above all, it manages to become a threshold for experiential immersion in the real place.

In conclusion, I quote an example of applied communication design research that illustrates spatialized literary atmospheres. The sequence of frames with an atmospheric effect is the development of a master's thesis in Communication Design at the Politecnico di Milano by Elisa Strada (Calabi and Strada 2020). It is a work of atmosphere design, with the creation of an audio/visual interpretation (photographic with narrator) of the most *imageable* textual nodes taken from the book by Anna Maria Ortese: "One night at the station", from *Silenzio a Milano*. A short text that is an example of otherness: it is an "other", original, unique point of view. Ortese does not give an identity to the place, but her own vision of the spaces. The quality of Ortese's text was therefore exploited, characterized by the

presence of a vivid "iconic-semantic virtuality" that evokes emotional images during reading: «in narration, the visual elements are not only described but judged, evaluated, characterized in order to evoke facts, stories, but above all fascination» (Lo Feudo 2013: 58). The story portrays the Central Station of Milan in the 1960s. The descriptions take place during a visit by the author, from which emerge the history of the station and the common thread of the frenetic rhythms between peak times and static moments.

The research project has defined an analysis methodology that proceeds from the segmentation of the text and identifying fractions of writing, distinguished by semantic function. The verbal "sequences" and "frames" describing "nuclei" of atmospheric meaning were then extrapolated from the overall text. The end result is a translated text, which aligns the imagable cores of the text to transform them into a narrative voice of photographic images, created with intersemiotic translation evidence: from the literary text to the visual text. The photographic images redefine the atmosphere in a synchronic time, between 1960 and 2020, and are made with rhetorical emphasis and selected for atmospheric coherence with the narration of Ortese (1998).[2]

The design of the atmospheres clearly transcends tourist suggestions and communicative stereotypes and moves towards new and inclusive points of view, considering that every place offers itself to perception and has aesthetic connotations useful for understanding memories of identity and otherness. Everyone «is constantly in a perceptive situation that decisively shapes their relationship with the world. Perceptions are, in fact, primarily traces of bodily presence, i.e. traces of a certain atmosphere» (Gorgone 2018).

We therefore conclude by recalling that for years the tourism industry has assumed an economic perspective oriented towards the experiential use of places (Martelloni 2007). Consequently, communication that enhances cultural and landscape assets has accepted this request for experience, highlighting, depending on the local characteristics to be promoted, *aesthetic*, *escapist*, *entertainment* or *educational* aspects, defined in the literature as «realms of experience» (Pine and Gilmore 2011). Among the experiential aspects most used and represented in tourist narratives, the aes-

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[2]   Link to the atmospheric representation taken from Anna Maria Ortese's book *Silenzio a Milano* (1998): "The design of the atmospheres and the dimensions of the narration": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05ewveKNWA8&feature=youtu.be>, online on 31 December 2023.

thetic dimension is also the one that actually allows for a more evocative and memorable experience. The aesthetic experience is all-encompassing, like an immersion, as we have seen: one is involved as a spectator and presence is important for the effect to be achieved (Pine and Gilmore 2011: 53). The aesthetic experience is therefore achieved by immersing oneself in the atmosphere of the places. The two terms – experience and immersion – both come from the interaction between body perception and space; moreover, experience is a specific quality of immersion (D'Orazio 2003). Even the analysis of tourists' behaviour and their participatory response suggest that they are requests for an immersive experience rather than for knowledge (Ortoleva 2009: 97).

This analysis considers the communication design of the areas capable of a different, inclusive communication, which proceeds by narration of micro-identities and contrasts and not by identity stereotypes. An elective tool is the set of atmospheres as points of view and their representation; so as to restore a visual vocabulary of atmospheric otherness as "memorable" points of view.

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COLLANA DESIGN DELLA COMUNICAZIONE

The **QUESTION OF ALTERITY** has become fundamental to understanding contemporary societies, which are increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and intersectional. That which is **OTHER** poses questions that one is not used to answering, poses itself as a term of contradiction, questioning established certainties and beliefs.

Alterity is a field yet to be explored, especially when one wants to move from theoretical reflection, inevitable and necessary, to transformative praxis.

Reflection on alterity leads to the **ABANDONMENT OF ALL FORMS OF CENTRALISM**. Acceptance of a culture based on the recognition of alterity and mutual responsibility requires overcoming anthropocentrism and androcentrism, but also Eurocentrism and logocentrism, that is, the domination of some forms of communication and signification over all others. Today, it is legitimate to think that the design dimension can also undertake research paths that highlight **THE NEED TO RECOGNISE THE OTHER**: from migratory flows to gender cultures, from social fragility to mental health, from cultural distances to the difficulties of social integration, etc. This is the direction in which the essays in this volume are heading. Design culture has the right tools to promote innovative and open visions of relations between people, peoples, and languages.

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