

# DESIGN OBJECTS MUSEALIZATION, DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

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ALICE SEMEDO  
JOSÉ BÁRTOLO  
SANDRA SENRA



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We are particularly grateful to the authors participating in this book for the kindness and enthusiasm with which they offered and shared their contributions, expanding from the themes presented and debated during the conference. Their perspectives challenge established disciplinary theories and contribute to the construction of new stories for objects in museum institutions. They are also a valuable contribution to the growth of literature on design objects in museums.

We want to thank Vasco Branco, Cathedratric Professor at the Department of Communication and Arts at the University of Aveiro and Director of ID+ Research

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<sup>1</sup> The international *Design Objects Conference: Musealization, Documentation and Interpretation* was held on 19-20 October 2017 at Auditório da Biblioteca Municipal Almeida Garrett, in Porto. More information at <<http://www.designobjectsconference.com/>>.

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Finally, we salute the audience, whose interest in the theme contributes to making the conference a successful event<sup>2</sup>.

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# INTRODUCTION

ALICE SEMEDO  
JOSÉ BÁRTOLO  
SANDRA SENRA

The international conference *Design Objects: Musealization, Documentation and Interpretation* sought to problematise the design object regarding its place in the museological context. In other words, it intended to study its relation to the canon, its narratives and the challenges for the recent expansion and renewal of this historical knowledge.

Recent research on objects related to design studies has fostered new understandings and interpretations of design objects. Based on different theoretical, ideological and critical perspectives, these pluralistic voices have been dissociating the objects and collections from instituted discursive archetypes, namely those historically generated by art history and design history and confirmed by academies and museums. This redefinition of discourses on design objects has cultivated the emergence of new questions in the museology field, namely on the perception of what a design object is and what narratives they take on — or should do so — nowadays in museums if one intersects economic, political, social and cultural perspectives.

Furthermore, this conference aimed to contribute to creating a space for sharing and discussing issues related to the musealization of design objects, in particular to the topics associated with collections management (documentation) and interpretation (exhibition and education) of these objects. It was expected to provide the spaces: 1) to know and evaluate new instruments and approaches in the organisation of knowledge on design objects (policies and practices for the categorisation of objects, narratives imputed to objects); 2) to collaborate for a re-evaluation of musealization processes practised in museological institutions (reanalysis and reformulation of policies, practices and exhibition discourses).

The conference also sought to bring together research groups from the fields of Museology and Design to relate the competencies produced in Academies to the problems generated in Museums, getting together theory and practice. A relationship was thus established between research groups from different universities dedicated to Museum and Design Studies, with museological institutions and other agents involved,

bringing together analogous or related research questions in order to contribute to an update of the theories and practices of diverse topics discussed by the two disciplines. The scientific meeting was aimed at researchers and professionals in the fields of museology and design and others who have museums and their contexts as an object of study.

The contributions of the speakers were quite diverse. Predominantly, the disruptions and discontinuities of the statute of the object of design in museums — and the disciplinary camp itself — were pointed out, and the itineraries and practices in which the design object moves were discussed. This book brings together some of the insights of that scientific meeting.

### **Part I. Design object statute and documentation in museums**

Jonathan M Woodham claims that it is fundamental to question traditional design principles and that museums must be aware of developments in the methods of both investigating and understanding them. He asks why museums mimic objects in their exhibition spaces and encourages them to integrate different design histories that take their regional identities into account and promote the equality and diversity of design.

Maddalena Dalla Mura problematises graphic design in the different institutions that hold them, revealing them in their various frameworks, from material to digital, from reproducible to ephemeral. This highlights the need for more investment in preserving these collections, trustworthy sources of historical, artistic, graphic and communications knowledge.

Iva Knobloch has demonstrated that the design object can be transposed beyond the design discipline and that the interdisciplinary and interinstitutional approach is a method for better understanding these objects in their different contexts.

Sandra Senra essentially introduces some of the issues that motivated her doctoral thesis, framed in the debate about how the material culture related to design should be institutionalised, understood and organised in museums today when there are so many areas of knowledge that also devote themselves to the study of the same objects. Her research produced a conceptual framework with contexts to consider museum design objects and the different descriptive dimensions that can create them.

### **Part II. Design object interpretation in museums**

Alice Semedo explores close and active listening as curation and design, arguing that museums need to build abilities and capacities to practise it if they are to work with others in designing and implementing policies that improve lives and communities.

Helen Charman describes the curatorial process conceived in the permanent *Designer Maker User* exhibition at the Design Museum in London. This approach

was based on interpretative assumptions that explored the design object's different disciplinary dimensions.

Francisco Providência describes and critically analyses the communications presented by José Bártolo and Bárbara Coutinho (Coutinho was unable to be present but was represented by a text), where he assumed the role of mediator during the conference. He also presents a critical exercise on museology and design museography.

### **Part III. Round table**

The importance of Portuguese private collections for constructing the history of design in Portugal was also discussed. Many of these objects, rescued and archived by these collectors and investigators, tell the country's history.

Bártolo's text explores the multifaceted nature of exhibitions, encompassing various media channels upstream and downstream of the exhibition. The author emphasises the significance of posters, catalogues, and public programming in shaping the exhibition experience. While primarily focusing on design exhibitions, it acknowledges the broader impact of design projects in fields like visual arts and architecture.

Nuno Coelho explores the graphic narratives of Portuguese product packaging and labels from his private collection, describing them in their respective curatorial and expository contexts as a designer-curator, particularly when they were made public.

Sofia Rocha e Silva reflects on some of the difficulties contributing to the construction of Portuguese graphic design history. This is a demonstration that the historical analogic rescue, almost always private, is fundamental for the construction of collective memory, but furthermore, digital graphic production should be addressed.

The articles in this book explore the relevance and urgency of reevaluating and reformulating the musealization processes of design objects and collections. Not only in expository discourses, the most visible facet of the narrative regarding the object, but also in the practices of investigating, documenting and interpreting. The different dimensions that cross design knowledge and its various formats should be described and explored to make them more inclusive. Museums may find in this problematic the opportunity to evoke their role as cultural mediators to explore the interpretative flexibility of the design object<sup>1</sup>.

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**PART I**  
DESIGN OBJECT STATUTE  
AND DOCUMENTATION  
IN MUSEUMS



# WHOSE OBJECT IS IT, ANYWAY?

JONATHAN M WOODHAM\*

**Abstract:** *Museum acquisition and display policies for contemporary design have been the subject of considerable debate for more than a century including the ways in which for several decades from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards an aesthetically charged approach was improbably shared with state-driven initiatives to improve standards of design for economic and social benefit. For many years both state and cultural interests placed a low premium on the performance and function of designed products. Museums internationally have also built up their design collections around «ubiquitous objects», i.e., iconic «designer» products that are collected and displayed as core objects regardless of their failure to represent the realities of living in a pluralist age, multicultural age. Today society faces the realities of a design agenda that has been emerging for some years: design for climate change, ecology, extended product life, health and well-being. Can this be represented historically in design museums today?*

**Keywords:** *design museums; contemporary design; design collecting policies; design awards; design history.*

**Resumo:** *As políticas de aquisição e de exibição dos museus relativamente ao design contemporâneo têm sido objeto de um debate considerável, durante mais de um século, incluindo sobre o modo como, por várias décadas, e a partir de meados do século XX, uma abordagem esteticamente carregada foi provavelmente partilhada com iniciativas impulsionadas pelo Estado para melhorar os padrões de design para o benefício económico e social. Durante muitos anos, tanto os interesses estatais como culturais atribuíram pouca importância ao desempenho e à função dos produtos concebidos. Museus internacionais também construíram as suas coleções de design em torno de «objetos omnipresentes», ou seja, dos produtos icónicos de «designers» que são recolhidos e exibidos como objetos centrais, independentemente da sua incapacidade de representar as realidades de viver numa era pluralista, multicultural. Atualmente a sociedade enfrenta as realidades de uma agenda de design que tem vindo a emergir há alguns anos: design para as alterações climáticas, ecologia, prolongamento da vida do produto, saúde e bem-estar. Poderá isto ser representado historicamente nos museus de design dos nossos dias?*

**Palavras-chave:** *museus de design; design contemporâneo; políticas de aquisição de design; prémios de design; história do design.*

For much of the past 150 years museum displays of design and the decorative arts have been dominated by the cultural and aesthetic values that accompanied their establishment. To the forefront were commitments to «improving» the taste of workers in arts manufactures, to «educating» the general public in what might be described as the principles of «good» or aesthetically pleasing design, or to displaying objects of contemplation untarnished by association with the worlds of consumption and everyday life. The question «Whose Object is it Anyway?» was rarely asked, nor how objects were made, marketed, purchased or used in life outside the museum.

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Furthermore, contemporary design has been inconsistently dealt with in many museums around the world. For example, following considerable criticism of the Victoria & Albert Museum London's contemporary design purchasing policies before the First World War they were largely abandoned until the later 1980s. Acquisition was restricted by a «50-year rule» which precluded the acquiring of an object less than 50 years old — with the notable exception of the purchasing activities of the small, low profile and controversial Circulation Department, established in 1947<sup>1</sup>. Following Circ's closure in 1977, Margaret Timmers from the V&A's Department of Prints and Drawings curated an exhibition entitled *The Way We Live Now: Designs for Interiors, 1950 to the Present*<sup>2</sup>, promoted as an «invaluable comprehensive survey of the British design scene at that time». A number of visitors were struck less by any notion of comprehensiveness than by the question as to who the «We» actually were. The educated, professional, museum-visiting middle classes?

By the 1990s inclusion of contemporary design in museum displays at the V&A was reinvigorated, sparked by the activities of the Boilerhouse Gallery between 1982 and 1986. Following an invitation from the V&A's flamboyant director Sir Roy Strong to the British designer and entrepreneur Terence Conran, the Boilerhouse (named after its location in the museum's former boiler house) operated as a quasi-autonomous unit within the Museum, supported by a five-year agreement underwritten by funding from the Conran Foundation (established 1980). Stephen Bayley, Conran protégé and the Boilerhouse's founding director, fashioned a new and often controversial presence within the V&A's walls through an intensive flurry of more than twenty contemporary design exhibitions that fell largely outside the existing scope of its host institution. This resulted in an uncomfortable relationship between the Boilerhouse, Sir Roy and many of the V&A's Keepers (senior curators) who often viewed their departments as personal fiefdoms and quasi-independent competing units within the wider museum setting.

Nearly two decades later in 2004 the Design Museum London pushed at definitions of design by mounting an exhibition devoted to influential British interior designer, social reformer, and society floral arranger Constance Spry. Much of the ensuing, especially male, industrial design and engineering-inclined criticism derived from gendered definitions of design, designers and design activity. Perhaps the Design Museum's 2011 acquisition of a Mikhail Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle, one of the world's most widely used assault weapons, represented the other end of the design spectrum.

The new Barcelona Design Museum (open from 2014) reflected the fusing together of a number of previously separate Barcelona museums, collections and

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<sup>1</sup> WEDDELL, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> TIMMERS, 1979.



archives, respecting local, regional, national and international understandings and the documentation of design. At Barcelona «the common denominator of all these collections from the past and the present is the object and all that it signifies or has signified and contributed to our lives: from conception, creation and production to use in different epochs and societies, during both the artisanal and preindustrial periods and the industrial and digital ages»<sup>3</sup>. 2014 also marked V&A London's more energetic commitment to the acquiring of contemporary design through the establishment of its Rapid Response Collecting Gallery.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attitudes to museum collecting policies, displays and exhibitions had commonly favoured the display of individual designers, materials, styles and techniques rather than acknowledgement of the social, cultural, economic, or political climate in which they came into being, were purchased and used. After 1970 the emergence of design history<sup>4</sup> resulted in an incrementally more informed, sophisticated and sustainable intellectual framework that embraced a larger and more diverse body of theoretical and cross-disciplinary perspectives, research agendas and geographies of design. Additionally, the range of national and international outlooks has proliferated through the formation of design history societies and journals in different countries together with the emergence of other more globally-oriented collectives that helped move design history away from the restrictive domination of Anglo-American interests, publishing and language, albeit initially flavoured with European modernist orthodoxies.

## UBIQUITOUS OBJECTS

A common characteristic shared by many design museums around the world is their acquisition of a series of «must have» design icons that reinforce a singular globalizing history of design out of synch with an age of pluralities and awareness of localities, regions, and peripheries that pervade so many aspects of daily life. The actors in this narrative account of 20<sup>th</sup>-century design might include the products of, and designers for, companies favoured by the educated, professional middle classes such as Herman Miller and Knoll Associates in the USA; Olivetti, Kartell, and Arteluce in Italy; Braun and Rosenthal in Germany; Arabia and Fiskars in Finland; Orrefors and Gustavsberg in Sweden; or Tendo Mokko and Sony in Japan. The list is almost endless and the «names» overwhelmingly male and white.

Take, for example, a single product that encapsulates the essence of a design icon synonymous with the «ubiquitous object»: the widely travelled 1969 Valentine typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass Jr. and Perry King for the Olivetti company,

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<sup>3</sup> BARCELONA DESIGN MUSEUM, [s.d.].

<sup>4</sup> WOODHAM, 2001: 85-97.

manufactured in Barcelona and assembled from metal and ABS plastic. Although available in other colours, it was most widely recognized in its bright red edition and stars in countless museum design collections worldwide. In Britain one might encounter the Valentine at the V&A and the Design Museum London, the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh; travelling to France one might renew its acquaintance as part of the Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre de Création Industrielle (MNAM/CCI) design collection in Paris. Elsewhere in Europe trips to Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum or Ghent's Design Museum would remedy any withdrawal symptoms, as would a visit to Lisbon's Museum of Design and Fashion (MUDE)'s Francisco Capelo Collection or Jerusalem's Israel Museum. And in Italy, the birthplace of the Olivetti company and for almost a lifetime home to the Valentine's superstar co-designer Ettore Sottsass Jr., it is hard to distance oneself from its cultural radar not only through its high visibility in museum collections but also through other ways in which its aura has been boosted across the decades, appearing in Carlo Scarpa's refurbished *Negoziolo Olivetti* in Piazza San Marco, Venice in 1917 and the Italian Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architectural Biennale, curated by Luca Zevi, as well in numerous other national and international exhibitions celebrating the centenary of Sottsass's birth. In the USA there are also countless possibilities to catch view of the Valentine, whether at MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Cooper Hewitt (Smithsonian Design Museum), all in New York; or even the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum 300 kilometres away, as well as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on the west coast, to mention but a very few. Added ports of call in this global cultural pilgrimage might even include the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences at the Powerhouse in Sydney, Australia.

Naturally, such ubiquity related to many other designed objects, albeit occasionally with less cultural pretensions. The BIC<sup>TM</sup> Cristal<sup>®</sup> biro ballpoint pen designed by Marcel Bich and the *Décolletage Plastique* design team, launched in 1953, was added to MoMA's permanent collection in 2001 and included in its 2004 *Humble Masterpieces* exhibition alongside Post-It<sup>®</sup> stick notes, paper clips, Tupperware items, and Frisbees, though in reality it sits more easily with the rarified oxygen of MoMA's aesthetically-charged 1934 *Machine Art* exhibition and 1950s *Good Design* shows than any major concession to understanding the culture of the everyday other than as «hidden masterpieces» of art and design. In 2006 the BIC<sup>TM</sup> Cristal<sup>®</sup> biro was declared the best-selling pen in the world following its 100 billionth sale and was included in the permanent collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre de Création Industrielle (MNAM/CCI) at the Centre Georges Pompidou.

## Realities

In the real world beyond the confines of museum settings, the Valentine typewriter was far from a commercial success and was quite expensive; its technical performance was fairly run-of-the-mill even if its intense carmine red casing conferred an emotional intensity that encouraged a close bond between the individual owner-user and consumer product. This took it beyond Olivetti's and IBM's post-war aestheticization of the typewriter as a means of helping to persuade women workers to move from the factory floor to the more «civil» ethos or «status» of the office workplace. In contrast, the lightweight Valentine was intended to be used anywhere but the office and was something of a personal mobile accessory in the increasingly informal, casual and fun world of 1960s pop culture, sustained by enhanced levels of disposable income. Nonetheless, it remained more of a niche «designer» product rather than a commercially profitable design object.

Furthermore, beyond its symbolic association with creativity at the hands of its would-be purchasers, there were other important aspects of design relating to the Valentine that had nothing to do with Sottsass, most significantly the typefaces<sup>5</sup>. The most widely known of these was the Quadrato font by the Head of the Olivetti in-house type design office, Arturo Rolfo. He designed it in 1962-1963 for use on Olivetti mechanical and electric typewriters including the Valentine. It became one of the company's most popular typefaces and was used on several typewriters. Stephan Müller designed a later digital version (2002), based closely on the quality, feel and appearance of the original.

## MORE OF THE SAME? COLLECTING CONTEMPORARY DESIGN IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

In 1982 the British-based Design History Society (est. 1977) held its sixth annual conference at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, on the theme of «Design and Public Collections», with European and USA speakers involved in collecting and displaying 20<sup>th</sup> century. They included Stephen Bayley, Director of the Boilerhouse Project; Michael Collins, Curator of the British Museum's Modern Design Collection; Stewart Johnson, Curator of Design at MoMA, New York; and Françoise Jollant of the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI), Paris. Striking an oppositional outlook, Jollant underlined the fact the CCI did not at that time collect exemplars of 20<sup>th</sup>-century design (or any other objects) and felt that documentation was key to understanding the wider social, cultural and economic significance of design. One design historian at the conference<sup>6</sup> commented that Stewart Johnson (MoMA) had remarked to his

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<sup>5</sup> RAMOS SILVA, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> KIRKHAM, 1983: 27-31.

audience that he had considered removing some of his slides (such as the Valentine typewriter) that accompanied his prepared talk on the grounds that the audience had already seen them at least twice in previous speakers' presentations about 20<sup>th</sup>-century collections.

It is worth highlighting here the work of the CCI, established in Paris in 1969, the year in which it held its first exhibition: *Quest-ce que le design?* It was integrated with the Centre Nationale d'Art et Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, in July 1973, prior to the latter's public launch in 1977. This new organization incorporated the Public Information Library (BPI), the National Modern Art Museum (MNAM) and the CCI, bringing the latter more strongly into the public gaze. It continued its mission of developing a cultural brief that included the organization of design exhibitions, issuing publications and further development of a design documentation centre (rather than object collection) that represented its core presence and philosophy. In the 1980 CCI exhibition *L'Objet industriel: empreinte ou reflet de la société?* design was considered from three perspectives: conception, distribution and consumption and accompanied by questions such as: who buys the product? What is it that is actually being purchased? And what are the reasons behind its purchase, what are the limitations of its use and how long will it last?

Just twelve years later the CCI lost its departmental autonomy and was merged with MNAM in the Pompidou Centre to form a single department (MNAM/CCI) in order to develop a «world-leading collection» of the arts, architecture and design. In the same year a series of exhibitions entitled *Manifeste* were mounted by the Pompidou Centre to give the wider public a taste of the combined departments: the second edition, *Manifeste2*, put into the public domain the new permanent CCI design collection, a radical change from its earlier investigative outlook focused around the documentation of design<sup>7</sup>. It incorporated some of the mainstream icons of 20<sup>th</sup>-century design found in most museums of 20<sup>th</sup>-century design, albeit with a French inflection, so providing yet another repository containing well-known ubiquitous objects — by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the MNAM-CCI collection comprised 1500 design objects (drawings, models and mass-produced products).

## MUSEUMS: CHANGING FACES AND PLACES

In the later 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries an increasing number of design museums rewrote their acquisitions policies and placed greater emphasis on research, innovation, education, learning and more sophisticated models of interpretation than in earlier post-Second World War decades. Several dimensions of this re-evaluation had been bolstered by the innovative research and scholarship that had helped establish the

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<sup>7</sup> WOODHAM, 1993: 55-57.

history of design. Since the 1970s several world-class museums of the decorative arts, art and design have followed the example of the V&A, the first to establish a dedicated Research Department under Dr Charles Saumarez Smith in 1990, the year in which the museum's first Research Register was produced. This consolidated listing of all research undertaken across the Museum allowed for greater strategic planning through a dedicated hub where museum curators, university research fellows and collaborative PhD students were able to research a variety of V&A oriented projects and exhibitions. However, it is perhaps a little shocking to think that, even as late as the end of the 1990s, an established researcher based in the V&A's Research Department was still able to comment that:

*The V&A, for example, altered its criteria for 20<sup>th</sup> century collecting a decade ago from objects of «aesthetic excellence» to objects of «aesthetic significance» thereby allowing more relative arguments to be made. However, there is a strong persistence of the idea that museums venerate their contents in ways that cannot be undone by the most plural-minded of curators. An object in a gallery, behind glass, untouchable and on a plinth, has a resonance that is hard to avoid. Museums give new context to objects, often denying their status as commodities and presenting them within a discourse of art value<sup>8</sup>.*

## **PARALLEL UNIVERSES? DESIGN PROMOTION, DESIGN AWARDS AND DESIGN MUSEUMS AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

In the immediate post-war years there was a widespread belief in many countries that improved standards of design in industry, coupled to the education of consumers, retailers and buyers, would lead to improved national economic performance and a better quality of life for citizens. Nonetheless from the 1950s to the 1970s exemplars of good design were often approved by state-funded design promotion and professional design organisations for their aesthetic rather than functional or durability qualities, seemingly having more in common with the expectations of traditional museum and gallery visitors than consumers seeking to buy practical, durable and good value products for everyday use.

Such thinking was discernible in the public face of design promotion bodies around the world, including those in Britain, France, Italy, Japan, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Australia to name but a few. Their outlook in this period generally reflected a moralizing critique of what were viewed as the excesses of conspicuous consumption so visible in the extravagant styling of contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> PAVITT, 2001: 285.

American automobiles, domestic products and the ephemera of everyday life. They took their place in a long time-line of design reform organizations and individuals, often sharing the modernist visual aesthetic favoured by curators, design collections and exhibitions of contemporary design at the time. The clean, abstract forms that accompanied such proselytizing were bound up in their origins in the International Style of the interwar years. Originally these forms were bound up with a social utopian mission to improve the quality of life for the majority of citizens and enjoyed a measure of success in a number of Europeans. Such forms also shared their roots in collections and exhibitions at MoMA New York, established in 1929 with a commitment to provide a showcase for contemporary art and design removed from the generally traditional collections found in most American museums and galleries. Important in this mission was MoMA's department of Architecture and Design, established in 1932, and the inauguration of its Design Gallery that put on the celebrated *Machine Art* exhibition in 1934. Curated by modernist-leaning impresario and architect Philip Johnson, it included a variety of industrial products such as laboratory glassware, springs, and steel balls for ball bearings, as well as domestic items such as kitchen mixers, electric toasters, cutlery, drinking glasses and even a Meerschaum tobacco pipe. A MoMA Press Release of March 1 1934 communicated that:

*Three methods of display will be employed: isolation—a water faucet, for example, will be exhibited like a Greek statue on a pedestal; grouping—the massing of series of objects such as saucepans, water glasses and electric light bulbs; and variation—a different type of stand, pedestal, table and background for each object or series of objects<sup>9</sup>.*

Such display techniques that showed the ways in which manufactured goods were viewed through high-cultural lenses — not as objects of use but rather as objects of aesthetic contemplation in a museum setting — were slightly moderated by exhibitions during and immediately after the Second World War years as, for example, MoMA's 1940 *Useful Objects under Ten Dollars* show accompanied by a checklist with prices as an aid to encourage consumers to buy «better-designed» goods. It was held under the auspices of the Department of Industrial Design and its then Director, Eliot F Noyes. Noyes was himself to go on to design a number of office products, some with coloured casings that were unequivocally part of the Good Design ethos: a celebrated example was his 1961 Selectric 1 («Golfball») typewriter for IBM. Like his predecessor, Philip Johnson, Noyes felt that many of the solely American products on display in 1940 compared unfavourably with European goods, writing that:

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<sup>9</sup> MOMA, 1934: 1.

*Unfortunately, in many American products superfluous decoration and meaningless forms abound. We found that the frankly utilitarian pieces were often the best designed [...] Objects for use in homes are often generally covered with superficial decoration adapted from world's fair [the New York World's Fair 1939-1940] motives, stream-lining or irrelevant «modern motifs». It was interesting to find that a new object appearing on the market for the first year was very often straightforward and interestingly designed, while the same object in its second year had usually acquired «style» by the application of spurious art in one form or another<sup>10</sup>.*

Other projects relating to the idea of affordable well-designed products included the 1948 *Low-Cost Furniture Competition* sponsored by MoMA, NY and the Museum Project Inc. It attracted 3000 entries from 31 countries and the Director of the Competition was the arch-advocate of «Good Design», Edgar Kaufmann Jr., also MoMA's Consultant on Industrial Design. The winners included Charles Eames (whose furniture populates design collections around the world), and the jury included Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who had emigrated to the USA in 1937 as an influential exponent of the values of European modernism, having been the first Vice-President of the Deutscher Werkbund and the final Bauhaus director in Berlin. His association with MoMA was close physically as well as spiritually, having been granted a large retrospective in 1947. Also, on the seven-person jury was Gordon Russell, the Director of the Council of Industrial Design (COID) in Britain, a major European spokesman for «good design» and an advocate of the COID Design Awards scheme launched in 1957.

Philip Johnson's 1934 *Machine Age* approach at MoMA was taken further by Edgar Kaufmann Jr., a prominent post-war Director of the Industrial Design Department at MoMA and the driving force behind the latter's *Good Design* exhibitions from 1950-1955. As had been the case at the 1940 *Useful Objects under Ten Dollars* initiative he acknowledged the significance of design in the marketplace by linking these exhibitions with the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. However, the extent to which this genuinely influenced consumers, retailers and manufacturers on any significant scale is highly questionable. The design values promoted by MoMA and Kaufmann were largely European in origin, the latter's writings often didactic in tone and guides to the etiquette of Good Design<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s the somewhat limited and aesthetically charged definition of Good Design in a number of countries across the world was increasingly challenged by the absence

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<sup>10</sup> MOMA, 1940: 2.

<sup>11</sup> KAUFMANN JR., 1950.

of systematic testing for safety, durability, efficiency, compliance with government standards and value for money. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Molony *Final Report of the Committee on Consumer Protection* (1962) was very critical of the State-funded COID for misleading the general public by implying that its Good Design Awards underwent any form of rigorous testing as part of the process, thus questioning exactly what «Good Design» was. Indeed, in 1967 the Director of the COID Paul Reilly acknowledged in an article entitled *The Challenge of Pop*<sup>12</sup> that the values of his state-funded organization were out of touch with many consumers. Three years later, in a well-known contribution to the periodical «Arts in Society», British academic, critic, writer and at times *agent provocateur* Reyner Banham spoke of the gulf between household gadgets as objects of contemplation in the contemporary kitchen and their post-use realities:

*the pretensions of Good Design require us to bring the noblest concepts of the humanistic tradition into direct conflict with scrambled egg and soiled nappies, and that's not the sort of thing that humanism, historically speaking, was designed to cope with. The big white abstractions must be devalued, ultimately, by these associations with dirt and muck and domestic grottitude*<sup>13</sup>.

## THE WIDER INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE OF GOOD DESIGN

As indicated, the canon of «good design» had played a role in post-Second World War efforts of government bodies and related agencies that sought to bring about improved standards in design in manufacturing industry as a supposed means of aiding economic performance and competitiveness. Many of those involved in post-1945 positions of relative power and influence in this endeavour were drawn from the ranks of the professional, educated and middle-class circles who had so admired the language of modern design and the symbolic and aesthetic values that it had represented in the interwar years. Space precludes a detailed analysis of how such developments and closely related design award schemes unfolded in the three post-Second World War decades in Britain, the Netherlands, West Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Norway as well as the wider world, including Canada, Australia, India, South Korea and the Philippines. In the 1950s and 1960s the syntax of «Good Design» shared an international common language in countless products such as Marcello Nizzoli's Mirella sewing machine for Necchi (Compasso d'Oro award, 1954), Robin Day's 1957 Pye television design (CoID Design of the Year Award, UK, 1957), or Yoshiharu Iwata's 1954 rice cooker for Toshiba (G-Mark Award, Japan, 1958).

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<sup>12</sup> REILLY, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> BANHAM, (1977 [1970]): 170.



Also contributing to debates in parallel with the Good Design drive was a slightly more nuanced and consensual view of what were deemed to be «The 100 Best Designed Products». Published and illustrated in an article in the American business magazine «Fortune» in April 1959<sup>14</sup> many of them were to be found in museum collections internationally, albeit almost exclusively on account of their aesthetic rather than social, domestic or practical considerations. The article was based on American industrial designer and educator Jay Doblin's (1920-1982) idea of drawing up a list of 100 well-known designers, architects and design educators to solicit their opinions: around 80 supplied their top ten choices as requested. After further correspondence a definitive list of 100 objects was drawn up and included designs by Marcello Nizzoli (the Lettera 22 portable typewriter for Olivetti, 1950), the number one choice, Mies van der Rohe (the Barcelona Chair, 1929, produced by Knoll Associates from 1953), Eliot Noyes (IBM electric typewriter, 1948), Gio Ponti (toilet for Ideal Standard, 1954), and Gruppo Bertone (the Citroën DS-19, 1955). This was followed up in a book published 11 years later, entitled *One Hundred Great Product Designs*<sup>15</sup>, with fuller rationale for the inclusion of objects, much of it worked up by Doblin's staff at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Many of these designs validated by the design profession mirror «ubiquitous objects» that are even today the staple diet of many museum collections of contemporary design.

From the late 1980s the V&A was forced to adopt a more positive acquisition policy for contemporary design, bolstered by the establishment of its Research Department in 1990; from 2002 the V&A's Contemporary Team took on responsibilities for displays, events and exhibitions of recent, and in some cases current, design. Showing the distance that had been travelled since the end of the 1980s the V&A stated in its 2010 *Collections Development Policy* that:

*Our collecting represents a variety of markets for design — the home, the high street, the commercial client and the specialist gallery or collector. As well as collecting works by internationally renowned designers, we reflect design trends in social, economic and other contexts. Similarly, we aim to represent the global nature of culture and practice and to chart the work of British-born and British-based practitioners<sup>16</sup>.*

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Space precludes a detailed analysis of the ways in which this repositioning of the V&A's collecting policy unfolded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as the ways in which it was —

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<sup>14</sup> DOBLIN, 1959: 135-141.

<sup>15</sup> DOBLIN, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> V&A, 2010: 63.

or was not — reflected in the outlook of other leading museums around the world that collected and displayed contemporary design. Its embrace of a more pluralistic yet defined approach and inclusion of «design trends in social, economic and other contexts» found in other progressive museums was also matched by a significant late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century redefinition of «Good Design» in the wider world of design promotion. For example, such a recalibration was highlighted in Japan in 1998 when the Ministry of Trade and Industry<sup>17</sup> launched a prestigious new Good Design Award scheme in 1998, replacing the aesthetically rooted G-Mark scheme inaugurated in the 1950s and closed in 1993. «Good Design» as a term internationally embraced in the post-Second World War decades had been increasingly abandoned due to its close association with the post-war modernist aesthetic of the corporate and capitalist world rather than the earlier radical commitment of the majority of modernism's founders to social utopianism and improved quality of daily life for the majority of its founders. The Japan Industrial Promotion Organization (JIDPO, established 1969), previous managers of the discarded G-Mark, oversaw the completely reconstituted 1998 «Good Design» scheme<sup>18</sup>. Awards fell into three main categories: Product, Architecture and Environmental Design, and New Tendency Design. The last was a category that included major contemporary social issues with a profound impact on Japanese life, including global warming and ageing populations. In addition to the Grand Prize and Good Design Gold Prize a range of other Special Awards were made, including Ecology Design, Interactive Design, Urban Design, and Long-Selling Good Design. Such ideological reorientation was reflected globally in a significant percentage of the many other international design awards available for the endorsement of national and multinational companies, countries and the widespread promotion of the potential significance of design as a means of unlocking and solving problems, the majority of which had been man-made. Furthermore, increasing levels of international design collaboration between several other Asian countries resulted in the closely linked ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, established 1967)<sup>19</sup> Design Selection awards that began in 2003. By 2008 the importance of consumers was also recognised in these awards which by then included categories such as «body», «life» «industry» and «society» with further awards such as Sustainable Design (2008) and Frontier Design (2009). These and many other international awards that draw attention to the wider issues that face our planet and its population — such as ecology, the environment, sustainability, health and well-being — are beginning to be more widely recognised as stages on which design has a leading role to play. How long will visitors have to

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<sup>17</sup> After restructuring in 2001 MITI became the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI).

<sup>18</sup> Since 2011 the Japan Institute of Design Association (JIDP).

<sup>19</sup> Member states included Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

wait until museums of design begin to reflect this and help educate future generations understand such pathways through historic displays of designed objects?

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# GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUMS: THE EXPANDED FIELD

MADDALENA DALLA MURA\*

**Abstract:** *The story of graphic design as a cultural and museum object is a complex one. While there have been few dedicated institutional efforts towards graphic design itself, its numerous outputs have been acquired by a variety of private and public entities as either works of art, collectible objects of fetishism, sources of information or archival and documentary materials on a variety of topics. The varied and dispersed presence of graphic design within institutes in charge of cultural heritage has been further complicated in the digital age. The spread of digital technologies has not only challenged graphic design as a specialised practice, but also led to an expansion of the design field that makes it more difficult to identify, and thus acquire and preserve, its products as distinct artefacts. Examining the status of the design object in museums through the lens of graphic design invites us to question the very ideas of design and museum, as this contribution aims to briefly illustrate through the discussion of several cases between the past and the present.*

**Keywords:** *graphic design; poster; GLAM; born digital design.*

**Resumo:** *A história do design gráfico como objeto cultural e museológico é complexa. Embora tenham existido alguns esforços institucionais relativamente ao design gráfico, os seus múltiplos resultados têm vindo a ser adquiridos por diferentes entidades privadas e públicas, como obras de arte, objetos colecionáveis de fetichismo, fontes de informação ou materiais de arquivo e documentais, sobre uma variedade de temas. A presença variada e dispersa de design gráfico em instituições dedicadas ao património cultural tornou-se mais complexa na era digital. A disseminação das tecnologias digitais não apenas desafiou o design gráfico como uma prática especializada, mas também conduziu a uma expansão no campo do design, tornando mais difícil identificar, adquirir e preservar os seus produtos como artefactos diferenciados. Observando o estatuto do objeto de design em museus através da lente do design gráfico convida-nos a questionar as próprias ideias de design e de museu, como esta contribuição procura ilustrar, de modo sucinto, por meio da discussão de diferentes casos entre o passado e o presente.*

**Palavras-chave:** *design gráfico; cartaz; GLAM; design digital nato.*

## THE SHORT STORY OF THE GRAPHIC DESIGN MUSEUM IN BREDA

The year 2017 marked the final stage in the story of the Graphic Design Museum in Breda. Opened in 2008, this institution was the result of a long, and controversial, process initiated in the early 1990s, when the Municipality of this small city, located in the southern part of The Netherlands, decided to relaunch its cultural and touristic image. Willing to avoid competition with the most prominent art institutions of other cities and drawing on the work of a local cultural centre (De Beyerd) that

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had organised visual arts, photography and graphic design exhibitions for decades, the Municipality decided to raise the flag of graphic design<sup>1</sup>. Since its opening, the Graphic Design Museum sought to balance past and present. Along with the main, permanent, historical section — that recounted 100 years of Dutch graphic design, i.e., the development of the profession in the framework of the modernisation process of the country — the institution was also quick to involve contemporary designers in the production of events and *ad hoc* projects, including exhibits for children, and multimedia and interactive installations<sup>2</sup> (such as the *Posterwall for the 21st Century* by studio Lust, which will come up again in this paper). Breda could certainly boast that it had a *unique* institution, and as such it was praised within the graphic design community<sup>3</sup>. Despite this enthusiasm, however, graphic design alone was apparently not enough to sustain the museum. After only three years the institution was re-named Museum of the Image (MOTI) and its mission changed from «graphic design» to «image» and «visual» culture. Likely reflecting broader cultural trends, particularly the emergence of visual and cultural studies, this transition occurred after the appointment, in January 2009, of a new director, Mieke Gerritzen<sup>4</sup>.

One of the first designers in the Netherlands to be involved in digital media in the early 1990s, Gerritzen had gained attention at the start of the new millennium with two publications she co-edited titled *Everyone is a Designer* (2001 and 2003), which, through a series of slogans and maxims, and with a bold design, extolled and questioned the present and future of graphic design as an increasingly pervasive and democratic practice<sup>5</sup>. Looking at design from the perspective of post-1980s visual culture, when anyone can produce and disseminate images, Gerritzen highlighted in her books the progressive demise of graphic design as a specialised profession and an individualised field. Marking the end of graphic design as it had developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its focus on posters, books, and printed materials, the advent of the Internet and social media had definitely turned design into a field of expansive and collaborative practices and strategies, pushing designers towards new metapositions as software developers or artists. This was also the vision that Gerritzen brought to the Graphic Design Museum once she became its director.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the founding of the Museum in Breda is available at <<http://www.architravel.com/architravel/building/graphic-design-museum/>> and <<https://www.bndestem.nl/breda/uniek-museum-met-roerig-verleden~a65d35c4/>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>2</sup> A self-reflective look into the making of the permanent installation of the Graphic Design Museum in Breda is offered by CLEVEN, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the report about the Museum by WALTERS, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See <<https://www.motimuseum.nl/en/over-moti/nieuws/mieke-gerritzen-new-director-graphic-design-museum>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>5</sup> GERRITZEN, LOVINK, 2001, 2003. Regarding Gerritzen's ideas about the transition from the era of graphic design to that of visual communication and of the image, see also GERRITSEN, 2010, 2013.

While during its transformation phase the Museum still kept an eye on graphic design and attempted to bridge the field's past and present — namely with the exhibition *Connecting The Past and The Future* in 2011, which drew from the collections —, in subsequent years its concentration clearly shifted from graphic designers and graphic design production to the use and circulation of images, examined through the lens of different media, disciplines and phenomena including photography, journalism, fashion, digital art, gaming, and consumption.

However, only five years later MOTI closed its doors. As of January 2017, its collection, organisation and premises were merged with those of the Breda Museum, basically a local history museum, to form the Stedelijk Museum Breda, a new institution devoted to cultural heritage and visual culture<sup>6</sup>. Within this context, the *museality* of the graphic design objects, i.e., their museum value<sup>7</sup>, underwent another shift: originally selected as exemplary works of graphic design under the Graphic Design Museum, and later repurposed as image culture under MOTI, they now shared space with religious artefacts, archeological finds and a variety of applied arts items, serving as evidence of material and visual culture, and being *picked* as artistic commentaries for exhibitions on several topics. A setback in terms of recognising graphic design as a distinct field, or rather, an acknowledgement of graphic design as one of the many significant manifestations of the ongoing civilisation process? However one interprets it, this further repositioning of graphic design as a museum object serves as a reminder that museum artefacts are always dynamic entities.

The musealisation of graphic design is a story characterised by uncertain and unstable encounters, situated between resistance and attraction, invisibility and visibility, presence, and oblivion. To question the status of the design object in museums through the lens of graphic design is intriguing not because it provides us a neat portrait, but because it complicates things. The history of graphic design's museality eventually brings into question the very ideas of museum and object, as I intend to briefly illustrate in this paper, by discussing several cases and perspectives, between the past and the present.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN AS MUSEUM OBJECTS

The relationship with museums is inscribed into the history of modern design. However, when it comes to graphic design, this relationship has been anything but straightforward.

The emergence of modern graphic design openly challenged the values, boundaries, and spaces of museums as institutions representative of a world that emphasised the past, tradition, rarity, and high culture. This is particularly the case with the illustrated poster, the quintessential graphic object, wherein lie the

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<sup>6</sup> See <<https://www.stedelijkmuseumbreda.nl>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>7</sup> For such concepts as *museality* and *musealisation*, as used in this paper, see DESVALLÉES, MAIRESSE, eds., 2010.

foundations of modern graphic design as the practice of «conveying ideas through the juxtaposition or integration of word and image into a holistic entity»<sup>8</sup>. Functional, mass produced, ephemeral, even cheap and messy in their first public appearances, the illustrated posters were conceived to perform their function — that is to promote and inform about new products and entertainments — *out there*, in the public space. Significantly, one idea that circulated early on about posters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in France, where the poster art phenomenon first bloomed, was that they themselves constituted a new kind of public institution. Their presence in the streets was described by some critics as an open, democratic and always up-to-date kind of museum, archive, gallery or library<sup>9</sup>. Artistic and aesthetic considerations were indeed central to this discourse given the kinship between poster design and the greater art of painting. Yet, posters were also praised for their wider cultural and educational significance, as information carriers and visual documents covering various aspects of modern life, from politics to travel, from medicine to technology. Other authors, however, soon advocated for the official recognition of posters *in museums*. The new commercial art, nonetheless, could not sit well in the old master's museums. While some claimed that *afficheistes* like Jules Chéret deserved to share space with great living artists in contemporary art museums<sup>10</sup>, other critics called instead for the establishment of a dedicated institution, one which would celebrate posters as a peculiar form of modern art, an applied and industrial art.

Engaged in erasing the hierarchy between the arts, advocates of decorative arts considered the works created through reproductive processes to be of equal value to fine arts. And yet, in order to sustain the recognition of posters as worthy of becoming *musealia*, they first had to «auratize» them, to build their cultural status, as thoroughly illustrated by Ruth Iskin in her compelling study *The Poster*<sup>11</sup>. This process intersected with the burgeoning phenomenon of collecting posters.

In 1900, for instance, Roger Marx, a critic and member of the advisory committee of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, proposed that the French state should set up a poster museum that would be part of a future museum of decorative arts. Marx's vision acknowledged all the multiple values of posters, both as artistic expressions and documental artefacts. He envisioned a «documentary collection» that would preserve and transmit to posterity «*the entire poster production*», serving as a testimony to the «art and life» of modernity. Interestingly, though, Marx's proposal appeared in the final issues of «*Maîtres de l'affiche*», a series of monthly publications released in the

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<sup>8</sup> JOBLING, CROWLEY, 1996: 3.

<sup>9</sup> See texts by critics such as Victor Champier, Frantz Jourdain, Jean Finot in the anthology of texts edited by DE IULIO, ed., 1996. See also the thorough study by ISKIN, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See Frantz Jourdain in DE IULIO, ed., 1996: 69-74.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding this process and the case of *Maîtres de l'affiche*, see ISKIN, 2014: 145 ff.



late 1890s that featured small-format reproductions of selected world-famous posters. Printed on high-quality paper and with high-quality ink, this sort of curated gallery in print was just one among several similar initiatives that at the same time responded to and fuelled the collecting craze, and that helped to re-purpose the poster. As Iskin highlights, «Maîtres de l’affiche», by taking posters out of their original context — the streets — and rescuing them from ephemerality, provided a critical framework that allowed collectors to examine and appreciate them closely with a focused aesthetic gaze. This approach eventually transformed these pieces into objects of private contemplation, creating an experience akin to that of the private art galleries of the past. It was only following the translocation of posters into this space of reception and signification that it became possible to consider these artefacts worthy of musealisation.

Even so, the dedicated museum envisioned by Marx did not come into being as such, at least not immediately. While the recognition of posters and other prints as worthy of preservation beyond their ephemeral nature contributed to the survival of many of them, it did not automatically lead to their immediate or permanent musealisation. (Marx’s own collection, for instance, was sold and dispersed after his death<sup>12</sup>). Only in the 1970s, almost eighty years after Marx’s proposal, Paris finally witnessed the foundation of a poster museum. Formerly known as the Musée de l’Affiche, and later renamed Musée de la Publicité, its collections of posters and advertising objects were finally incorporated into the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUMS, BETWEEN PRESENCE AND INVISIBILITY

As a specific graphic genre, the poster has generally had a quite fortunate history of patrimonialisation thanks to art-historical considerations and to the mediation of collecting practices. However, when we move beyond art posters and beyond criteria such as authorship, rarity, and exemplarity, which easily fit the context of arts institutions, we find that the musealisation of graphic design has generally followed nonlinear and scattered paths; pathways along which the multiple nature of the graphic artefacts, as both documents, media, works of art and of design, has been put into play alternatively and intermittently<sup>13</sup>. Another institution in Paris offers a significant case in point: the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> ISKIN, 2014: 341, note 89.

<sup>13</sup> An examination and discussion of the life of graphic design objects, of graphic design’s temporality and of the unstable status of graphic design artefacts is offered by the sociologists Jérôme Denis and David Pontille. See DENIS, PONTILLE, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See <[http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections\\_et\\_services/estamp/s.affiche\\_graphisme.html?first\\_Art=non](http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections_et_services/estamp/s.affiche_graphisme.html?first_Art=non)>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. For a discussion of the activities of the Département des Estampes et de la Photographie de la Bibliothèque nationale de France with regards to graphic design, see the presentation given by Anne-Marie Sauvage at the *Journée d’étude sur l’histoire du design graphique* organised by the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP), 18 September 2014, available at <<https://www.cnap.fr/anne-marie-sauvage>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

Given its mission to document and preserve any published material and medium, and thanks to the legal deposit requirement, the BNF today holds nearly a million posters printed in France, collected independently of any criteria of quality or authorship. In this regard it can be argued that the BNF has come closer to embodying Marx's vision of a comprehensive poster museum. However, the importance of the BNF for the musealisation of graphic design goes beyond that. As revealed by the study and exhibition work carried out by the library's Département des Estampes et de la Photographie (Department of Prints and Photographs), the broader holdings of the BNF can, in fact, be considered an extensive «graphic design» (*graphisme*) collection encompassing a wide range of media and artefacts, including books, magazines, advertisements, CD sleeves, visual identity systems, websites, and, of course, posters.

Over time, as the BNF progressively appraised its holdings in terms of graphic design, it also began assuming the role and functions of a graphic design museum or curatorial department, actively engaging in all activities related to musealisation as a process that entails not only physically or conceptually extracting objects from their original environment and relocating them within a museum setting, but also studying, interpreting and displaying them<sup>15</sup>. An emblematic example of this commitment was the 2001 international exhibition *Graphisme(s), 200 créateurs 1997-2000*, which was also made available online through a dedicated micro-site<sup>16</sup>. More recently, furthermore, the BNF has begun promoting contemporary graphic design<sup>17</sup>.

Apart from highlighting that the museum function is certainly not exclusive of institutions bearing the title of «museum», the case of the BNF also sheds light — as an exception to the rule — on a distinctive aspect of the fate of graphic design objects as cultural heritage: their dispersed and overlooked existence. «Visible/invisible» is how the French graphic design historian Catherine de Smet described this issue a few years ago with regard to the sources of graphic design history<sup>18</sup>. As she observed, artefacts related to graphic design have often times been acquired and preserved — when not incidentally — primarily as items of documentary value, as *evidence*. These acquisitions have been made by institutions with diverse missions, which often do not prioritise design; institutions such as libraries and media archives, private and public collections and archives, as well as specialised museums of various types, including history museums and company archives. This condition can be regarded as a reflection and effect of the paradoxical nature of graphic design: the more graphic artefacts

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<sup>15</sup> DESVALLÉES, MAIRESSE, eds., 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See <<http://expositions.bnf.fr/graphis/affiche01/index.htm>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>17</sup> See for example the exhibition *Graphisme contemporaine et engagement(s)*, organised in 2015. A discussion of this event is offered in the conversation between Anne-Marie Sauvage and Véronique Marrière, *Focus sur... Graphisme contemporaine et engagement(s)*, available at <<https://www.cnap.fr/actualites/graphisme-en-france/entretiens/focus-sur-graphisme-contemporain-et-engagements>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>18</sup> DE SMET, 2012 [2007].

contribute to shaping our environment and to mediating our relationship with the world, the less visible graphic design is *in* and *of* itself<sup>19</sup>. Within GLAM institutions, graphic design may be present but may not receive the recognition it deserves as such. In order to keep track of and to fully comprehend the status of graphic design as *musealia*, it is therefore necessary to keep looking in multiple directions.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN AND DESIGN MUSEUMS, BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

If we turn our attention to those museums that, from their very inception, have been devoted to design, we find that within this context too the status of graphic design objects as *musealia* has been subject to diverse interpretations, and has not remained immune to shifts, discontinuities, and even disruptions between past and present.

Museums are time machines, capsules that at the same time house our past and showcase our present. This condition is particularly challenging for museums of modern and contemporary art and design, which were established to be *of their time*, serve the present and potentially guide the future. While documenting the advancements of their respective fields — employing retrospective, comprehensive, or prescriptive approaches to varying degrees — these museums have eventually come to embody multiple visions and temporalities: those of their mission, focused on the present, and those of the objects they preserve. Playing a dual role, design museums bear the responsibility of bridging and reconciling these different visions, a process that can lead to a range of outcomes, encompassing both continuity and disruption. This is particularly evident in the case of fields such as graphic design that have been closely associated with specific types of artefacts or media, the value and centrality of which have changed over time. Two cases from Europe and the USA, the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich and MoMA in New York, can illustrate this point.

Rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of the applied and industrial arts movement, the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich was founded in 1875, pairing a museum and a school for sustaining the education of artists and designers<sup>20</sup>. A typical encyclopaedic endeavour, the Museum has acquired over time a broad typological and chronological sampling of free and applied arts, from the 15<sup>th</sup>-century to the contemporary era, inclusive of 20<sup>th</sup>-century modern and modernist design — to which Swiss designers have notably contributed. As for graphic design, such an open collecting strategy means that the Museum has come to preserve a great variety of items and typologies that include design works and preparatory materials by name designers, as well as

<sup>19</sup> See also LYOTARD, 1990 for a discussion of the paradoxical nature of graphic design.

<sup>20</sup> With regard to the history of the Museum für Gestaltung's collections, see the publication edited by Christian Brändle and Verena Formanek (BRÄNDLE, FORMANEK, 2009); for a discussion of their multiple values, see in particular the essays by BRÄNDLE, 2009, ADAMSON, 2009 and FORMANEK, 2009.

everyday graphics and anonymous ephemera, ranging from typography to popular magazines, packaging and even party flyers. Posters are also preserved, yet they form a dedicated collection<sup>21</sup>. The richness of the Museum's collections was well represented in 2009 in the publication *Every Thing Design*, cleverly designed by the Dutch designer Irma Boom as a sequence of unexpected visual, material, or conceptual combinations of selected items of rarity and mass production, high and popular culture, authorship and anonymity as well as functionality. In this book, released at a time when the Museum engaged in a process of re-organisation, the director Christian Brändle wrote that «establishing a conclusive definition of [design would be] tempting when developing a consistent collection strategy». However, he also noted how the responsibility of dealing with a collection that contains a plurality of media and values can offer unexpected insights and serves as a stimulus for maintaining a broad understanding of design<sup>22</sup>.

In the case of the Museum für Gestaltung, the presence of the past informs the vision for the future. Today, this vision is certainly also supported by the partnership with the art and design university in Zurich. Although the collections of historical items may have become less central to the training of designers, today they nonetheless attract the interest of scholars and students invested in researching design from the perspectives of visual and material culture, design history and cultural studies<sup>23</sup>. It should be noted, however, that the Museum in Zurich primarily focuses on graphics in print<sup>24</sup>. If and when the Museum in Zurich begins venturing into the field of digital design, to what extent will it be possible to emphasise continuity in preservation, acquisition, and exhibition practices?

One possible answer to this question comes from MoMA in New York, an institution where the musealization of graphic design in its various print and digital manifestations seems to be oriented more towards divergence than continuity.

The quintessential champion of high modernism's principled and prescriptive approach, MoMA has been a central player in the canonisation of modern art and design. In this institution, graphic design has been a province of the department of Architecture and Design<sup>25</sup>. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, as this department progressively emphasised the autonomy of industrial and product design from the realm of fine arts, focusing on their functional and innovation values, graphic design

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<sup>21</sup> As for the Museum für Gestaltung's collections of posters and graphic design, see in particular MAUDERLI, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> BRÄNDLE, 2009: 200.

<sup>23</sup> MAUDERLI, 2002: 48.

<sup>24</sup> As confirmed in an email addressed to me by the Head of Collections Operations, 5 September 2017.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the history and collecting strategy of the Architecture and Design department at MoMA, see ANTONELLI, 2009, and, with specific regards to graphic design, ANTONELLI, 2004. Most recently, the French researcher IMBERT, 2015 investigated exhibitions of graphic design in modern art museums, and MoMA is one of her case studies.

within the Museum remained largely perceived as an extension of modern art. This approach was expressed in an acquisition strategy that focused on posters, a medium more easily associated with the developments of the major artistic movements, notably painting. (Exceptions to this concentration can be found in the Museum's history, yet these consist mostly of donations and gifts or instead of temporary exhibits that did not contribute to the collections<sup>26</sup>). At the dawn of this century, the relevance of the existing graphic design collection and its capacity to properly and fully represent the Architecture and Design department's understanding of design was questioned internally. In 2004, Senior Curator Paola Antonelli, who had for years been committed to exploring and promoting the expansion of all forms of design, expressed that frustration in an article titled *Is Graphic Design, Not Simply Posters, Museum Worthy?*<sup>27</sup>. In her text she envisioned a collection of graphic design which, rather than posters and prints, would take in different artefacts and media, including time-based and digital designs.

At MoMA, however, the attempt to bridge the past and future under the label of *graphic design* ultimately failed. By the onset of the 2010s, a split had apparently occurred at the Architecture and Design department. While pieces from the *graphic design* collection have typically been displayed in exhibitions devoted to 20<sup>th</sup>-century posters and graphics in print — of which several have been curated by Juliet Kinchin, a specialist in modern design and decorative arts<sup>28</sup> —, the exhibitions and programmes devoted to the more contemporary, experimental and innovative strands of design — such as *Talk to Me*, curated by Antonelli in 2011 and devoted to communication between people and objects — have dropped *graphic design* in favour of *visual communication*, or just *design*<sup>29</sup>.

## DIGITAL (GRAPHIC) DESIGN, EXPANDING THE MUSEUM

In the new millennium, the uncertainties regarding the status of graphic design within museums seem to intensify. Graphic design has exploded into an ever-expanding territory, which is difficult to track using conventional criteria and categories such as medium type or authorship, and where tangible outputs and actual objects may no longer be the primary focus. To borrow the words of the curators of the exhibition

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<sup>26</sup> As a closer look into the history of exhibitions held at MoMA and its collections can reveal; see <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>27</sup> ANTONELLI, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the shows curated between 2009 and 2011 by Kinchin and devoted to Polish posters (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/955>>), Hungarian revolutionary posters (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1120>>) and to posters of the London Underground from the 1920s-1940s (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1083>>). [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>29</sup> Interviewed the same year by Véronique Vienne (2011) for the French graphic design magazine «Étapes», Antonelli clearly stated that her interest lies in functional design and visual communication, a kind of design that she juxtaposed with, or opposed to, «graphic design». See VIENNE, 2011.

*Graphic Design: Now in Production*, organised in 2011 to celebrate this expansion, graphic design «has broadened its reach» becoming a «widely deployed tool»: a tool that anyone can use to «create and publish visual media», and a tool that designers also still use, albeit now as «authors, publishers, instigators, and entrepreneurs»<sup>30</sup>.

Co-produced by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, and curated by Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton, *Graphic Design: Now in Production* certainly offered an extensive examination and representation of this landscape. However, this exhibition also evidenced the challenges that any institution wishing to deal with the graphic design field today would have to confront, especially with regard to the possibility of establishing clear boundaries around graphic design and of representing the full spectrum of its manifestations. Indeed, several genres and formats were put on display, from posters to motion graphics and dynamic visual identities. Nonetheless, not only some common areas such as environmental graphics and websites were noticeably absent<sup>31</sup>, but, as the curators themselves admitted in the publication accompanying the exhibition<sup>32</sup>, they were compelled to exclude numerous more intangible and process-based forms of design (some of which, it should be noted, were instead documented in the catalogue itself, which had been conceived not merely as a mirror of the displays but as an independent investigation of the field). Beyond the difficulty of showcasing in the exhibition space some of the most advanced forms of graphic design, the question that remains open is whether it is still feasible today to preserve and manage them for future interpretation and communication — that is, to transform them into proper *musealia*. This is a particularly pressing question with regard to digital design, where the *graphic* quality of the design is deeply intertwined with, and difficult to separate from, other aspects such as programming, editing and interactivity.

I would now invite the reader of this paper to make a quick online search of two photos that document the *Graphic Design: Now in Production* show at the Walker Art Center and to compare them<sup>33</sup>. One image shows two people admiring a cascading installation of screen-printed posters made by the Minneapolis firm Aesthetic Apparatus<sup>34</sup>. The other image shows a visitor looking at his mobile phone while standing in front of the installation by the Dutch studio Lust, *Posterwall for*

<sup>30</sup> See the press release at <<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2011/graphic-design-now-in-production>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>31</sup> See MCCARTHY, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> BLAUVELT, LUPTON, eds., 2011.

<sup>33</sup> The images can be found here: <<http://calitreview.com/31479/art-review-graphic-design-now-in-production-the-hammer-museum-los-angeles/>> and here: <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/gdnip-9-lusts-posterwall-for-the-21st-century>>.

<sup>34</sup> This image illustrates the review of the exhibition by Michelle Lopes, 19 October 2012, available at <<http://calitreview.com/31479/art-review-graphic-design-now-in-production-the-hammer-museum-los-angeles/>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

*the 21st Century*<sup>35</sup>. This installation is a projection of ever-changing digital posters that are automatically generated via a script, drawing content from various Internet sources and reacting to input from the viewers: their movements or their messages sent to a computer. The visitor we see in the image is, therefore, not distracted or indifferent to the installation, but rather, he is actively engaging with it. And this is how we are likely to encounter graphic design today: by interacting with it. So *you look* (first picture) versus *you interact* or, if you like, *you participate* in the design (second picture).

Departing from the most traditional graphic design object, the printed poster, the installation by Lust provocatively questions the status of design as well as that of the graphic designer in the digital age. In their installation the design is an algorithm and a tool, open to any form or content. *Posterwall*, however, is also an exemplary case of a contemporary graphic design «object» that defies musealisation. The original version of this installation was made for the Graphic Design Museum in Breda in 2008. In subsequent years, Lust developed new implemented versions that were put on display at various venues worldwide. Therefore, one might initially ask how these versions should be regarded in relation to one another. Are they part of the same project or separate projects?

A closer look into the story and status of the original version of *Posterwall* at the Stedelijk Museum in Breda illuminates other issues. Having been conceived as an installation *for* the museum, *Posterwall* was not acquired in the usual sense and did not properly enter the Museum's collection. The installation was on display on an on-loan basis, so the source code and concept remained property of Lust which, by the way, closed in summer 2017<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, the preservation of the project was not taken over by curators or keepers at the Museum. However, Twan Bastiaansen, from the Multimedia department at the Museum took it on himself to deal with that issue, as part of his job, which implied, as he explained it to me in an email, making «things work for exhibitions»<sup>37</sup>. In order to preserve the exhibit, Bastiaansen resolved to act along two lines, adopting solutions that, however, only serve to demonstrate the difficulty of circumscribing the object to be preserved. On the one hand, he followed the best practices of media art conservation, where documentation is considered a viable solution when dealing with time-based works<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, he recorded a short

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<sup>35</sup> This image illustrates a post in the Walker Art Center's blog that features Andrew Blauvelt's description of the installation, and which was posted on 8 December, 2011, available at <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/gdnip-9-lusts-posterwall-for-the-21st-century>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>36</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August, and 31 October 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August 2017.

<sup>38</sup> With regard to the preservation of immaterial forms of design and the key role of documentation, see, recently, SCHOLZE, 2016.

video while the installation was on display at the Museum<sup>39</sup>. He also made a backup of all the files (posters) generated at the Museum. Lust, however, had also designed an online version of the *Posterwall* on a website that no longer exists. This raises the question of whether this website, as well as the posters generated on it, should also be considered as part of the project. On the other hand, when the installation was dismantled Bastiaansen preserved the hardware and the software *as they were*. And yet, as he explained to me, in order for the installation to actually work again, the code would require updating since the software and the API that generated the posters have become obsolete. Although Bastiaansen himself could update the code, would this change mean an alteration of the original work? In any case, the change would require licensing by the designer.

However peculiar the status of the *Posterwall* may be, the challenges it poses in terms of musealisation and preservation are not unique. Bastiaansen shared with me his concern about other digital designs belonging to the collection of the Graphic Design Museum, now the Stedelijk Museum in Breda, such as John Maeda's renowned *Reactive Books*. Made in the 1990s, these «books» only work on OS9. The Museum therefore saved an old Mac to run them. Yet, as Bastiaansen wrote to me, «Will that withstand the test of time?» His answer: «I would not know»<sup>40</sup>.

The digital has not only changed design, but it is also changing museums, requiring them to rethink their approaches and practices. Clearly, this is a demanding process, and not all museums have the necessary resources to undertake it. Moreover, it is a process that necessitates embracing a cross-cutting perspective beyond the disciplinary and typological divisions that traditionally permeate museum departments. Two major design museums, both in New York, have recently begun to lead the way in this direction.

Making a notable impact in the field of design, in 2010 Paola Antonelli announced that the department of Architecture and Design at MoMA had acquired the «@» sign. This symbol, which has a long history dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century, was eventually «appropriated», so to speak, by the American electrical engineer Ray Tomlinson when, in 1971, he turned it into a key element of the e-mail system of communication. A «powerful act of design» as Antonelli called it, justifying its inclusion in MoMA's collection<sup>41</sup>. Obviously, this acquisition was more of a consecration, an acknowledgement or a «tagging» given that this sign is in the public domain, on everybody's keyboards, that it is free, and it is immaterial. MoMA does not own it

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<sup>39</sup> Lust itself produced a video about this project, see <<https://vimeo.com/31793671>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>40</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August 2017.

<sup>41</sup> ANTONELLI, 2010a, 22 March. See also ANTONELLI, 2010b, 24 March. The acquisition of the «@» sign received great attention within the museum world and the graphic design community. See, among other articles and texts discussing it, VIENNE, 2011.



in a conventional sense. Still, the department of Architecture and Design produced a number of interpretive, mediation and communication acts *around* and *about* it which are not much different from those usually carried out in regard to more traditional, physical museum objects. Articles were featured on MoMA's blog («Inside/Out») and press announcements were released to explain the acquisition and to present the story of the «object». The «@» was also put on display, for example in the exhibition *This Is for Everyone*, in 2016, along with another new entry in MoMA's collection, the Creative Commons License Symbol (acquired in 2015). Through all these acts we might say that MoMA actually *built* its object.

Before the novelty of these virtual acquisitions wore off — the Museum's team itself began joking about them when on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, it announced that the museum had acquired the «.» baseline dot<sup>42</sup> — the Museum of Modern Art had already started delving more deeply into the question of what and how to acquire and conserve digital design artifacts. In 2012, the inclusion of 14 video games into the Architecture and Design collections marked the start of a comprehensive strategy for the preservation and display of interactive designs. Taking into account all aspects of design, including visual quality, aesthetic experience, elegance of the code, and player's behaviour, the Museum developed a protocol that encompasses not only the acquisition of the games' software and hardware and technical documentation, but also the devising of ways to display them and to enable the audience to experience them by playing full or demo versions.

While all of this was happening, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, welcomed its first piece of code — an act that was part of a larger process of renovation and transformation of this institution into a museum of the future where the digital is recognised as central, from exhibition design to collecting strategies<sup>43</sup>. In 2013, the Museum's Digital & Emerging Media department acquired the iPad app Planetary. Intended by the Cooper Hewitt as a case study to explore all of the conceptual, technical and legal issues that arise with regard to the musealisation of design as not so much an «object» but a process or a living object or system, this acquisition included the app's source code as well as documentation of the design and development of its software<sup>44</sup>. As Seb Chan, then Director of Digital & Emerging Media stated on a page of the museum's website dedicated to documenting and explaining the new direction taken by the museum's collections: «We cannot pretend to have all the answers [...] but we think it's important to start making the effort to find some

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<sup>42</sup> PERSSE, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> See MEYER, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> CHAN, 2013. See also CHAN, Seb; COPE, Aaron (2014). *Collecting the present: digital code and collections*. Paper presented at the Museum and the Web conference, Baltimore, MD, 2014. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <<https://mw2014.museumsandtheweb.com/>>.

of them»<sup>45</sup>. This commitment was recently reaffirmed at the Cooper Hewitt with the launch of the Digital Collection Materials Project, which seeks to «set standards, practices, and strategies related to digital materials» within its permanent collection<sup>46</sup>.

In the digital age, as design continues to expand, it also becomes increasingly ephemeral. While the musealisation of digital design is an area open to experimentation, experiences like the ones mentioned above reveal a prominent aspect: the operational shift of focus from the object itself to documentation, with documentation design and production becoming central activities in preservation.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *excursus* I have made in this paper brought us from the wall of posters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the *Posterwall for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; from the open museum in the public space to the open museum on the screens of our personal devices; from an age when graphic design *as such* did not exist to an age when graphic design as we used to know it appears to be expanding to a point — according to some — of disappearing; from an age when the physical graphic object, finite and ephemeral, defied, and at the same time aspired to, the museum's impermanence to an age when precariousness and immateriality have become valuable qualities of design and, apparently, of museums, too.

In 2010-2011, when the Graphic Design Museum in Breda was being transformed into the Museum of the Image, this institution published a book and organised a symposium under the title *I Don't Know Where I Am Going, But I Want To Be There*<sup>47</sup>. This claim — which was used on that occasion to signify the broadening of the field of graphic design and the uncertain position of the graphic designer — also aptly fits the description of graphic design's relationship with museums, which today appears to be stretched to extremes. Although we cannot be certain where this relationship will lead, continued investigation of its evolution can offer us a unique lens for examining issues of cultural heritage on the brink of presence and oblivion.

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<sup>45</sup> CHAN, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> See <<https://labs.cooperhewitt.org/tag/digital-preservation>>.

<sup>47</sup> KRIER, RUYG, KAMPMAN, eds., 2010.

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# BOOK OF OBJECTS: *DESIGN IN THE CZECH LANDS 1900-2000, INSTITUTIONS OF MODERN DESIGN*

IVA KNOBLOCH\*

**Abstract:** *The contribution will describe the process of creation of the book of design objects in the Czech Lands 1900-2000. Its main motivation was the fact that the interest of the Czech audience in design has been growing in the last decades, but the historical knowledge and understanding of the design's essential context has been still missing. The book focuses on institutions that played a fundamental role in the social functioning of design and were closely related to the historical turbulence of the Czech Lands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** *design objects; different contexts; new perceptions; Czech Lands; institutions of design.*

**Resumo:** *A contribuição irá descrever o processo de criação do livro de objetos de design nas Terras Checas 1900-2000. A sua principal motivação foi o facto de o interesse do público checo pelo design ter crescido nas últimas décadas, embora o conhecimento histórico e a compreensão do contexto essencial do design não sejam ainda conhecidos. O livro tem por enfoque instituições que desempenharam um papel fundamental no funcionamento social do design e estiveram intimamente relacionadas com a turbulência histórica das Terras Checas no século XX.*

**Palavras-chave:** *objetos de design; diferentes contextos; novas percepções; Terras Checas; instituições de design.*

The text is focused on the process of creation of the book *Design in the Czech Lands* which was issued in 2016 as a result of a long-term research project of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, the central institution of acquisition, documentation and presentation of design objects in the Czech Republic.

Our main motivation was the fact that the interest of the Czech audience in design has been growing in the last decades, but the historical knowledge and understanding of the design's essential context has been still missing. Design became a popular feature of leisure time magazines. Design festivals taking place in different Czech cities attract crowds of people. In 1999 the annual festival Designblok was founded, today the biggest design festival in Central Europe and Czech Grand Design Award annual ceremonies have been generating design medialised celebrities who seem to fall from heaven.

The research was undertaken in the time when the museum was closed due to renovation and new depository building construction. The first step was the list of institutions to investigate. Why institution was the key topic? The institutional basis influences the character of design more than objects of fine art. The design

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object is very often the result of complex relationships where the institutional aspect becomes determining. We investigated schools, magazines, associations, factories and cooperatives, research institutes, design studios as well as leading figures who became also institutions themselves. As a definition of institution we used the broad sociological perspective when the most interesting institutional feature is its ideal spiritual core, the «guiding principle», which in the opinion of some modern theoreticians creates the basis of each institution and defines its character and function<sup>1</sup>. We were also inspired by Michel Foucault's notion of the dynamics of modern institutions. Institutions appear as a field of ideas in constant tension, balancing contradictions through reciprocal actions of individual actors<sup>2</sup>.

The publication follows the idea of the «improvement of production and taste» in the decorative art revival movement beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, efforts in creating «minor art for everyday use» in the programme of the Artěl group after 1908, and later «the artistic overcoming of matter» in the production of Cubist artists through the Prague Art Workshops (Pražské umělecké dílny), ideals of «modern housing and living standards» in the activities of the Czechoslovak Werkbund (Svaz československého díla), or the effort to engage the «artistic imagination» in the shapes of machines and work tools in Zdeněk Kovář's school after WWII, as well as the scientific and research activities in the field of housing culture developed at the Institute of Housing and Clothing Culture (ÚBOK) in the 60s. The publication illustrates also the idea of the representation of the socialist state and socialist consumerist culture, discussed at the Institute of Industrial Design (IPD) in the 70s, as well as the alternative approaches which emerged on the margins away from official institutions and socialist industry. The programme of the Czechoslovak transformation after 1989 is shown in the building up of new design institutions in a liberal democratic society as the Design Centre.

Images of objects play the role of the materialisation of institutional guiding ideas, as their manifesto, testimony, authentic document, visual studies example, sensual pleasure, technical innovation or artistic endeavour. The aim of the research was the book of interpretative texts illustrated by objects/images. We wanted to offer a double reading of the book: textual and pictorial. That's why the most important images have comments enabling this autonomous visual insight into design area.

The other neuralgic problem is the term Czech Lands. We avoid the term Czech design, which is difficult to define historically and is linked with the complicated term «nation»<sup>3</sup>. We prefer the geographical delimitation. The region of Czech Lands has suffered historical turbulences — disintegration of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,

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<sup>1</sup> See VONDRÁČEK, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> FOUCAULT, 1961, 1963, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> See the text of Jonathan M Woodham here questioning the term British design.

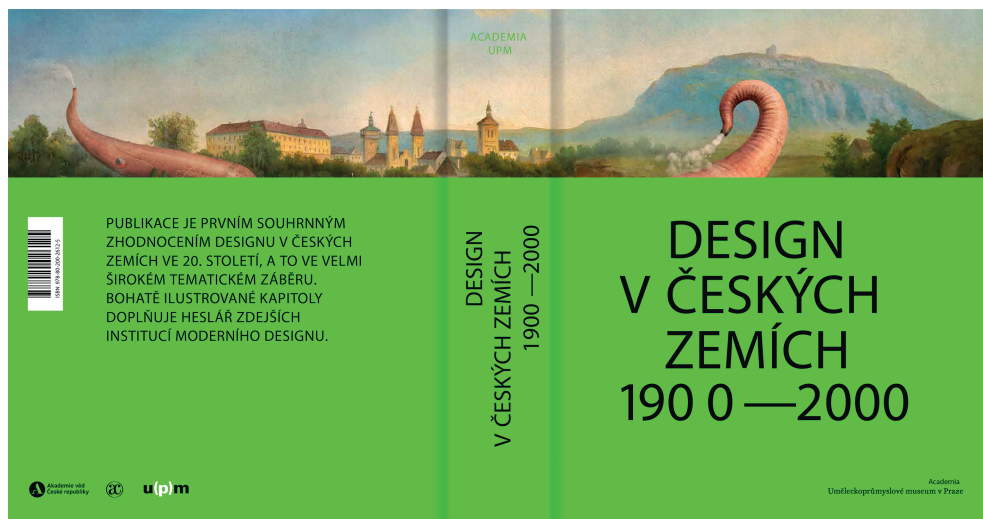


Fig. 1. *Design in the Czech Lands 1900-2000* book cover

Source: Design Štěpán Malovec, illustration Adolf Lachman, Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague

then independent Czechoslovak state with part of Ukraine, which was multi-ethnic and the German population created more than 30% of its population. After WWII, the expulsion of the German population affected sensitively the situation of post-war glass and textile industry. During socialism many designers were forced to emigrate, especially after the Soviet invasion in 1968. Is their work part of the design in the Czech Lands or Czech design? In the beginning of the 90s Czechoslovakia was divided into the independent Czech and Slovak Republics, some émigré designers (Bořek Šípek, Eva Jiřičná, Jan Kaplický) came back and had a strong influence on the new generation thanks to their cosmopolitan experience.

Czech Lands — historically Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia — are in the centre of the turbulent and culturally hybrid phenomenon of Central Europe, a geopolitical territory which has been always part of the more global European context and its geopolitical dynamic<sup>4</sup>. We can observe some kind of integrity in design created in the Czech Lands but the publication suggests other crossovers reacting on global geopolitical and cultural situation. The famous Thonet factory, which is the milestone of industrial design and stands at the beginning of design history in Czech Lands, is a very good example of the complicated «national» and geopolitical design trademark. The founder of the factory, Michael Thonet, was a German who accepted Austrian citizenship and his most important factories were founded in Moravia due to wood's high quality<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> KROUTVOR, 1990: 51.

<sup>5</sup> The factory changed owners and name in the past century, but the production of bent wood furniture still continues under the trademark TON.



Fig. 2. Neon tube advertising from 1938

Source: Photography by Salim Issa Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 261

Rich habitat of wood, sand, carbon and water was also the reason why Czech Lands became Austro-Hungarian monarchy's industrial zone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The industrialisation of country and cities was extraordinarily fast and massive. New factories, the rail net, and new transport and communication system, the reform education professional schools and museums of decorative art and design were born in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those institutions — factories, schools, groups, magazines — created the platform of the accelerated design progress in the Czech Lands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fast tempo of design development was acquired after the independent state, Czechoslovakia, was born in 1918.

The very broad and versatile network of institutions creates the content of the book which for the first time maps out this field in such a comprehensive manner, encompassing product, industrial, graphic and textile design, as well as fashion, jewellery, applied and advertising photography, interior design and the new materials of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We focus not only on official state command, but also on everyday use objects and luxury design products, pop culture, DIY phenomenon, industrial production and new craft endeavour. Through multidisciplinary approach we try to focus on metamorphosis of life style and complex environment.

The content on 700 pages is divided into 20 chapters with 1000 images from 100 private and state collections; the book embraces 400 design institutions whose



profiles are added in an appendix. We collaborated with curators of other museums, university professors and doctorands; almost 40 colleagues participated in the research.

The authors and editors of the publication have based their methodology on an art history approach, forming a unified interpretative schema, revealing close artistic and institutional connections between fine art and design. Beyond this, the publication also suggests further political, sociological, economic and gender links that are important for design as a multidisciplinary field. The publication clearly demonstrates that methods of art history are not always optimal and sufficient for the design research and that the contamination from other fields of human knowledge is needed corresponding with the multidisciplinary and hybrid character of the design objects and processes themselves. The complex nature of design is also the reason why design and applied art are often underestimated in the art history discipline.

The book reveals also the various roles design has played in the system of modern production, education, exhibitions, advertising and other forms of communication. In the publication, some themes are reinterpreted, some newly discovered and defined as for example the relationship of design to the pop culture in the 20s and the 30s, organic design and existentialist tendencies in the 30s, design under pressure of ideologies 1939/1953, individual studio creation under socialism, design and environment in the political period of Normalisation after 1970, and alternatives in design from the 60s to the 90s.



Fig. 3. Iron from the 60s

Source: Photography by Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 403



Fig. 4. Underground music, covers DIY, 80s

Source: Photography by Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 497

We invited artists to collaborate on the final visual form of the book and their interventions stimulate new interpretations of subjects, sometimes in a subversive way. Photographers Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein created introduction photographs for every chapter and their elusive atmosphere suggests other design object's dimensions and levels we could perceive. The cover is the work of the graphic designer of the book, Štěpán Malovec, who invited the contemporary young artist Adolf Lachman. Štěpán found the idyllic painting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century describing the landscape of the mythical hill Říp, where according to ancient narratives the Czech nation was born. Adolf Lachman added biomechanical creatures with «Czechoslovak» trademark which are some kind of ironic, comic and strange features in the landscape. They suggest questioning about design's nature and sense, industry, environment, nationalism, progress... and other subversive readings.

The book *Design in the Czech Lands 1900-2000, Institutions of Modern Design* became the first encyclopaedia of design historical overview documented through objects of design. The journalists call it «the bible» of the Czech design or institution itself, which is not true. We did not want to create the canonical image of the design history in the Czech Lands but we aimed to open the door of design perception. That is also the statement of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, and always has been: to cultivate the understanding of the design objects and their context. But the

complete work has not been done yet. For this moment the book exists only in the Czech version. The English version is needed; due to minority language, this historical overview would never enter into global design history discourse<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See Jonathan M Woodham in this volume and his preface in PELCL, 2012.



# DESIGN OBJECTS IN MUSEUMS: DIFFERENT LENSES, (RE)NEW OBJECTS\*

SANDRA SENRA\*\*

**Abstract:** *The redefinition of discourses on design objects and their representation in museums raised new questions in museological studies. This text presents considerations from Portuguese protagonists in all disciplines, exploring how design objects can be seen through different lenses in museums. It was part of the doctoral research in museology, intending to contribute to theorising musealization processes for material culture related to design. The investigation resulted in an instrument to build and rethink objects from a design perspective. Enabling the interaction of different pieces of knowledge allows for exploring new narratives and representations. This approach facilitates the production of retrospective and prospective discourses for design objects among collections from various organisations, enriching their understanding.*

**Keywords:** *design objects; representation systems; museums; academy; interdisciplinary confluence.*

**Resumo:** *A redefinição dos discursos sobre objetos de design e a sua representação em museus levantou novas questões no campo da museologia. Este texto apresenta algumas considerações de protagonistas portugueses de diferentes áreas disciplinares, explorando como os objetos de design podem ser percebidos através de lentes nos museus. Esta reflexão fez parte de uma investigação de doutoramento na área de museologia, com o objetivo de contribuir para a teorização dos processos de musealização da cultura material ligada ao design. A investigação resultou num instrumento com diferentes dimensões de análise para construir e repensar objetos na perspetiva da disciplina de design. Ao viabilizar-se a interação entre diferentes naturezas de conhecimento, poderão ser exploradas novas representações entre coleções. Esta abordagem facilita a produção de discursos retrospectivos e prospetivos para objetos de design em diferentes organizações, enriquecendo a sua compreensão.*

**Palavras-chave:** *objetos de design; sistemas de representação; museus; academia; confluência interdisciplinar.*

## INTRODUCTION

This text is part of a doctoral study in Heritage Studies, in the specific field of specialisation of Museology, conducted by the author at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto. The thesis is entitled *Objetos de design em museus. «Portugal Industrial – Ligações entre o Design e a Indústria»*. *Estudo de caso em*

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*profundidade* (Design objects in museums. «Industrial Portugal – Links between Design and Industry». In-depth case study), was funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and was supervised by Professor Alice Semedo (FLUP/CITCEM) and co-supervised by Professor José Bártolo (ESAD/esad—idea). This doctoral research deepens some of the generated and emerging concepts from the conclusions of the CIDES.PT – Portuguese Design Interpretation Centre project<sup>1</sup>, coordinated by Professor Vasco Branco (University of Aveiro/DeCA/ID+), namely those related to the authority of the disciplines that operate in the organisation and production of knowledge in museums and the principles that underlie design objects musealization<sup>2</sup>. This study revealed that in museums and institutions with design objects and collections, there is uncertainty and ambiguity about the nature of the term and the concept of design and that the discursive construction of objects and collections is markedly linked to the art history and classic design history matrices, which gives evidence to the dimension of aesthetics, the function, and the known authorship of objects<sup>3</sup>.

This paradox would end up placing the questions of the thesis on four levels: in the debate of critical museology that questions the authority of the disciplines that operate in the organisation and production of knowledge in museums; in the discussion about the construction of the history and culture of design, which admits the inclusion of objects outside the spectrum of industrial production, as it considers that design has different geographical, material and immaterial translations; in the debate on the musealization of design on the role that the institutions dedicated to it played in the narrative construction of the history and culture of design and on how to make traditional concepts compatible with contemporary ones; and, finally, in the debate on the role of other museological institutions linked to further disciplinary and thematic areas in the narrative construction of the design object, considering that design constitutes a discipline of a multidisciplinary nature. This article will focus on the last point, namely, will forward some considerations arising from the narratives enunciated by some Portuguese protagonists from different disciplinary areas regarding the idea of the design object and how it can be thought of through these lenses in museums.

Knowledge organisation about objects in a museological context is based on different disciplinary assumptions. Things are reflected and documented according to their different intellectual contexts, which is why museums' heterogeneous and

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<sup>1</sup> See «CIDES.PT — Portuguese Design Interpretation Centre». [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <<http://www.cides.pt>>.

<sup>2</sup> BRANCO *et al.*, 2014: 327-332; PROJETO FCT, 2013-2015.

<sup>3</sup> SEMEDO, Alice; SENRA, Sandra; JORGE, Natália (2015). *Práticas e Recursos na Curadoria Digital de Objetos de Design*. In *Encontro MUX2015 — museus em experiência*. Aveiro: Departamento de Comunicação e Arte; SBDIM — Serviços de Biblioteca Informação Documental e Museologia da Universidade de Aveiro. Atas; SEMEDO; SENRA, 2015.

idiosyncratic nature naturally gives them different meanings and subjectivity. This variety of arguments about objects values them in almost all their dimensions. However, when we try to intercept this diversity of knowledge about the same thing in different museums, the variety of epistemologies, descriptive fields and vocabularies that are individually processed and used by each of these institutions makes it difficult and almost impossible to intersect different narratives. Recording knowledge about objects in a pragmatic and standardised way in museums, considering, simultaneously, each of their subjective specificities and natures — theoretical, historical, social, cultural, material, and immaterial — is not a very simple quest. This multidimensional, multi-contextual and multidisciplinary nature of the objects makes the construction and organisation of complex knowledge. And often ambiguous.

In 1989 Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer introduced the concept of «boundary objects» in an article discussing the formation of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California-Berkeley. They sought to introduce the idea that the museum's story should be told by different social actors, from the museum director to professional researchers, collectors, academics, and amateurs. And that this coexistence of heterogeneous knowledge could be achieved through cooperation and the use of a cooperative model for management, which would allow the diversity of information to be processed and new knowledge to be generated. The border object represented, in this way, any object that belonged to multiple social worlds and assumed distinct identities circumscribed by the different approaches attributed to them<sup>4</sup>. This concept of boundary object would be used as a theoretical tool by several disciplines and investigations to mediate tensions between the various expressions of science that construct knowledge. At the same time, it promotes coherence between different social worlds it allows them to maintain their identities. The authors thus proposed the development of an analytical protocol, an ordered base structure, to interpret other materials in complex institutional contexts<sup>5</sup>. This production of new knowledge implies communication, diplomacy, cooperation, and coordination between different actors to harmonise meanings. The different conceptions and their ramifications should be identified, followed by their discussion, description, and triangulation. This analysis method does not presuppose epistemological importance, i.e., it does not seek to impose scientific or non-scientific points of view. The common denominator «boundary object», which intends to frame the different perceptions, proposes to mediate the overlapping areas of the multiple social worlds to bring out new representations<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 409-413.

<sup>5</sup> STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 387.

<sup>6</sup> STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 388-389, 411.

The concept of boundary object became pertinent to this research, as it theoretically frames the questions and the purpose of this research that seeks to intersect different disciplinary contexts for the understanding, construction and communication of its multiple meanings and points of view that a single object can translate. To understand the experience of the design object from the perspective of other disciplinary fields in the Portuguese context, exploratory interviews<sup>7</sup> were carried out with researchers specialised in different fields of knowledge working in museums and academia. The aim was, essentially, to collect perceptions and interpretations about the design object in the national context and to add new concepts to those explored during the literature review, namely descriptive dimensions that guide and produce the representations of the design object, to configure a «boundary object» document. The semi-structured interview survey was considered the most appropriate technique for obtaining this qualitative data through the flexible conduct of the questions and the inclusion of emerging issues during the interview. These informants were asked to explore new ideas and formulate and reformulate questions. Nine interviews were conducted with significant Portuguese researchers working in the fields of museology and design, decorative arts, crafts, anthropology, ethnography, technical industrial heritage, and museum documentation<sup>8</sup>. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the design object at the contemporary moment and to get to know the place it occupies from the point of view of some of the disciplines at the frontier of design thinking. The interview script consisted of fifteen open questions (seven main questions and eight sub-questions), distributed by four themes, which asked informants from museums

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<sup>7</sup> Each of the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted between April and June 2018 at the interviewees' workplaces — Aveiro, Caldas da Rainha, Guimarães, Lisbon, Porto and Sacavém. An interview protocol was administered, and the informed, free, and informed consent document was distributed for participation in the research study and for capturing and recording photography, video, and audio. All ten interviews were recorded in audio format and transcribed in full, respecting the characteristics of the oral register. The textual data from the interviews, expressions, or sentences were transcribed, identified, and systematically coded in a categorical format through an interpretative reading. This method allows the identification, analysis, and description of themes or meanings in texts with different epistemological and ontological positions. The qualitative content analysis programme NVIVO supported the description and organisation of the thematic categories. Once this process was completed, the different qualitative values were reflected, compiled, and systematised to illustrate the variability and tonality of the responses from the interviewees' narratives.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents from the museum field: Dr. Conceição Seródio, Museu de Cerâmica de Sacavém (E1-CS); Dr. Filipa Quatorze, Vista Alegre Museum (E4-FQ); Dr. Maria João Vasconcelos, former Director of National Museum Soares dos Reis (E6-MJV); Dr. Carlos Coutinho, Director of the Ceramics Museum of Caldas da Rainha (E8-CC); Professor Bárbara Coutinho, Director of MUDE. Museu do Design e da Moda, Francisco Capelo Collection (E10-BC); Respondents from the academic field: Professor Filomena Silvano, Department of Anthropology, New University of Lisbon (NOVA FCSH), CRIA and URMIS (Université de Paris) (E2-FS); Professor Fernando Moreira da Silva, Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon (FA/ULisboa) and President of CIAUD – Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design (E3-FMS); Professor Alexandre Matos, Department of Heritage Sciences and Techniques, Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto (E5-AM); Professor Maria da Luz Sampaio, University of Évora and Interdisciplinary Centre for History, Cultures and Societies – CIDEHUS (E7-MLS).



and academia for narratives from their experiences and reflections about the design object in the museological context.

At first, the purpose was to discover to which museological identities the interviewees considered design objects to exist and to which types of cultural assets they referred. Secondly, the aim was to identify the criteria of values and meanings that the interviewees considered indispensable for constructing the design object and which enabled its incorporation into an institution. In a third moment, the point was to find out from the interviewees which discipline or disciplines best fit the design object in an institution. Also, how these objects can be collected, registered, organised, classified, and categorised, and what criteria of differentiation, approximation or superimposition exist about other things. To know the official documents which serve as a basis for this organisation. And in a fourth and final moment, the intention was to find out from the interviewees how design objects can be organised and represented in the exhibition space, what communication devices can enhance their understanding and what the intentions of the exhibitions concern the public. The results of this interpretative analysis and respective discussion are presented below<sup>9</sup>.

The phonetic and semantic ramifications of the Italian word «disegno» and their application to different geographies, specialised actions or concretised products gave to the actual word «design» multiple narratives and meanings and a material appearance that took on various forms over several centuries<sup>10</sup>. It is not uncommon, therefore, that in the extensive published bibliography of design history, design studies and practice or design criticism, among others, there is almost always an opening paragraph cautioning about the ambiguity of the design concept, the difficulty in determining its boundaries and the complexity of translating, in words, the versatility of its procedural, production, mediation and consumption attributes<sup>11</sup>. Added to this complexity is the difficulty of circumscribing a discipline claimed by a constellation of disciplines that run across humanities and sciences<sup>12</sup>. Historians historically accept that «design» gained expression with the British industrial revolution. It is also in this context that, for the first time, a distinction will be made between the two types of production: artisanal production, namely craft and industrial production. The first is associated with the artisan, who conceives and executes the objects manually in a workshop without following pre-production projection methods. At the same time, the latter, designed by one person and machine-produced by several, is divided into two production phases, namely the design project phase and the serial product

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the interview script and full interviews, see SENRA, 2022: vol. 2.

<sup>10</sup> ONIONS, *ed.*, 1966: 259; SIMPSON, WEINER 1998: 519.

<sup>11</sup> HESKETT, 2002: 3.

<sup>12</sup> MARGOLIN, 1989: 5-8; BORADKAR, 2006: 3-15.

manufacturing phase<sup>13</sup>. Herein lies the rupture established by the design discipline, which differentiated the artificer's role from the designer's emerging role<sup>14</sup>, later acclaimed by an industrial designer<sup>15</sup>. The design statute sought to legitimise and emancipate itself intellectually from handmade crafts. It eventually distanced itself from the term craft, which has long been regarded as a second-tier concept, in disuse and naive, and has come to be regarded as the antipode of craft-based production techniques<sup>16</sup>. However, there has always been a dichotomy between production methods and techniques. The most critical perspective of design thinking advises that design must be assimilated as an uninterrupted process, which results conceptually and technically from different chronological, historical, political, economic, social, aesthetic, and cultural scales and environments<sup>17</sup>. Although many scholars remain hesitant about this constructivist view of design history, much progress has been made in recent decades with the production of studies on the discipline<sup>18</sup>. This new insight about the perception of what a design object is and the systems of representation in which they are placed raised further questions in the museum studies field, namely about the collections management field, where researchers have been working on solutions to embody these new dimensions to understand, complement and interpret design collections<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding the idea of what may constitute a design object, in the Portuguese context, there was diversity in the understanding of its concept. For some of the interviewees from the academic world, it is a concrete product<sup>20</sup> that is linked to the intention and the act of thought found by its author or brand to solve a particular problem<sup>21</sup> and may result from the intellectualisation of the field of study that conceptually and methodologically circumscribes it, more specific design<sup>22</sup>. However, this is not an obligatory premise since contemporary reflection on the concept separates the notion of design from its classic conception, which opposes the industrially produced product based on the primacy of design and the assumption of the projectual process (knowledge-thinking)<sup>23</sup> to the handcrafted product, which results from the process of authorial intervention determined directly on the material (know-how)<sup>24</sup>. The design object, in its distinct classifications — equipment, product,

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<sup>13</sup> HAUFFE, 1998: 10-11; HESKETT, 2002: 18; ERLHOFF, MARSHALL, 2008: 90-91.

<sup>14</sup> HESKETT, 2002: 18; PEVSNER, 1975: 45.

<sup>15</sup> HAUFFE, 1998: 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> LEES-MAFFEI, SANDINO, 2004: 207-209.

<sup>17</sup> DILNOT 1984a, 1984b; MARGOLIN, 2005: 237-239.

<sup>18</sup> MARGOLIN, 2005: 235.

<sup>19</sup> APPIANI *et al.*, 2007; ANTONELLI, 2009: 570-572; BRÄNDLE, FORMANEK, 2009; FARRELLY, WEDDELL, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewees E3-FMS; and E5-AM.

<sup>24</sup> Interviewees E2-FS; and E3-FMS.

communication, fashion, digital data or research<sup>25</sup>, is also associated with an ideal of form which must be related to a practicable functionality and a certain aesthetic ideal, which is not clarified<sup>26</sup>, the idea of the designer author and the idea of a consumer product that can give it the status of an object of worship and desire, which makes it different from other objects and can contribute to its heritage and musealization process<sup>27</sup>. In the Portuguese museological universe, design is related to the verb as a process of action (of know-how) and the methodology of the projectual process (know-how-thinking)<sup>28</sup>, which involves the practice of drawing<sup>29</sup>. This idea is also present in the conceptualisation of one of the interviewees from the academy<sup>30</sup>. The design object can configure everything conceived and produced by humanity to transform its surroundings in its material and immaterial dimensions<sup>31</sup>. However, it should be noted that the ontological, etymological and epistemological nature of the concept varies according to the contexts, realities and perspectives in which the object is found, meaning that the disciplinary boundaries that distinguish industrial production from handmade production, the authorial and the anonymous, can be blurred<sup>32</sup>. Any object may be framed as a design object as long as it is appropriately contextualised concerning its morphology which, as a standard parameter, should consider ergonomics and the relationship of its consumption context, which may be associated with the idea of intelligible utilitarianism<sup>33</sup> or the idea of ornamentation<sup>34</sup>, also to its physical characteristics, which considers the production techniques and technologies — industrial in its most classical category<sup>35</sup> — and the production systems, as well as the contexts of material and personal consumption and the contexts of cultural value<sup>36</sup>. Transversal is the idea that the design object should result from a harmonious process established between the intellectualisation of a problem conveyed to a practical, functional and beautiful need<sup>37</sup>. The same happens in academic design object thinking<sup>38</sup>. In this variety of academic and museological thoughts, it seems clear that the notion of the design object is still very much linked to the traditional concept generated by the English industrial revolution, which separated

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<sup>25</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E7-MLS.

<sup>27</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewee E1-CS.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee E10-BC; E8-CC.

<sup>32</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.

<sup>34</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; and E4-FQ.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewee E6-MJV.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; and E1-CS.

<sup>37</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.

<sup>38</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.

the handmade from the industrial, but also the focus of the discipline of art history in its westernised perspective, concentrated on the author, aesthetic contemplation and ideals of the modernist movement associated with simplicity and depuration of form so that the object can fulfil a specific useful function. However, the discourses also reveal the ambiguity about what may or may not be a design object, transporting this responsibility to the hierarchies and disciplinary assumptions demarcated by classification boundaries that may separate, approximate, or overlap them. This compartmentalisation of disciplinary foundations, although necessary in the scientific analysis of objects, as Macdonald<sup>39</sup>, Pearce<sup>40</sup>, Alexander and Alexander<sup>41</sup> or Ambrose and Paine<sup>42</sup> have observed, when sublimated by institutions, inevitably conditions new ways of seeing and limits the construction of other narratives for objects.

From an academic perspective, the design object may be present in different museological institutions as long as its representation criteria are restricted. It may be related to the missions or curatorships assigned to it in exhibition contexts<sup>43</sup>. However, this idea is not consensual, once again, because the difference between know-how (handicraft) and know-how-thinking (drawing and the projectual process-design) is mentioned, mainly as it is unclear whether the latter includes the former in terms of the act of intellectual creation<sup>44</sup>. The idea that all museums have designed objects is also fractious, particularly when we evoke the classifications established by the disciplines which differentiate the craft object from the industrial object<sup>45</sup>. The industrial museums, generally thematic (ceramics, glass, etc.), science and technique museums and decorative arts museums are those whose collections are admittedly closer to the idea of the design object<sup>46</sup>, as they allow analysis and interpretation of their dimensions of production technique and technology, materials or raw material or aesthetic value<sup>47</sup>, but also their dimension of historical, social and cultural/patrimonial significance, especially when considering the valorisation of the know-how which expresses national identity<sup>48</sup>. The utilitarian objects of ethnographic museums may be evoked as design objects, provided that contemporary design thinking is articulated<sup>49</sup>. MUDE is the most frequently cited Portuguese design museum, although some consider it to be something other than a design museum compared to other

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<sup>39</sup> MACDONALD, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> PEARCE, 1994b.

<sup>41</sup> ALEXANDER, ALEXANDER, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> AMBROSE, PAINE, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.

<sup>44</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.

<sup>46</sup> Interviewees E2-FS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>48</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

international institutions<sup>50</sup>. From a museological perspective, MUDE is the Portuguese design museum most referred to by interviewees. MUDE frames different objects, authorships, periodisations, concepts, cultural contexts, and classifications, which tell a part of the history of Portuguese design and particular international objects and authors<sup>51</sup>. The museum is flexible in its concept of design objects. It admits that they represent different contexts and that these can be intersected, even with those of other non-design institutions, if they are correctly situated in their contexts of cultural, authorial, economic, procedural value, etc. Crossing these lenses allows different readings to be obtained and builds new knowledge<sup>52</sup>. As for the other institutions represented by the interviewees, they have not considered design museums. Still, it is admitted that some of the objects from their collections may be design objects, respectively, those from the Louça de Sacavém Factory and the Porcelain Factory Museum of Vista Alegre<sup>53</sup>. In the case of the Soares dos Reis National Museum, the object of design is present as long as the concept of design is applied retrospectively concerning the valuable mode of consumption and the value of aesthetic quality<sup>54</sup>. In contrast, the Ceramics Museum does not consider itself a design museum since the useful and symbolic-artistic objects produced in this material were not, at the time, understood as objects of design, even though they were based on design, using modern technology, and were based on a type of serial production. In this sense, the concept should be framed as objects in the light of the assumptions of the contemporary moment<sup>55</sup>. Another issue associated with the idea of a design object is related to the dimension of authorship, where it is admitted that the object of anonymous authorship can also be considered a design object<sup>56</sup>. It seems consensual among the interviewees from academia and museums that the design object can be thought of in different dimensions, which allows them to assume different identities and values of meaning<sup>57</sup>. However, it is advocated that these perspectives be framed correctly in the theoretical assumptions of their field of study — design. Thus, it becomes evident that the established disciplinary delimitations, although more flexible in their beliefs, still configure conflict zones for a broader construction of knowledge of objects<sup>58</sup>.

Regarding the dimensions of information to be considered in the documentation of design objects, the academic interviewees think that this record of information should be consistent with the primary museological criteria that are transversal to

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<sup>50</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewee E6-MJV.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee E8-CC.

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee E4-FQ.

<sup>57</sup> PEARCE, 2012, 1994a; CONKEY, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> CANDLIN, GUINS, 2009; KOPYTOFF, 1986.

all museums when registering objects, namely those related to their intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics<sup>59</sup>. However, it is also considered that various dimensions are generically associated with the institution's vocation and its collection management practices and policies regarding object classification<sup>60</sup>. Therefore, particularly in museums with design objects and collections, the dimensions of information to be considered should be related to the different classes of objects without disregarding the interaction between the classifications assigned since a single object may belong to different categories<sup>61</sup>, also the design thinking the dimensions of production technique/technology, raw material/material, state and edition/production system, type of consumption and the multiple contextual values<sup>62</sup>. The exhibition space should manifest the design approach related to project methodology, its dimension establishing the relationship between form and function, the aesthetic-artistic framework<sup>63</sup> and the objects' consumption contexts<sup>64</sup>, making mention of their ethical-moral implications<sup>65</sup>. Also, the dimensions related to the techniques and technologies of production and their distinct chronological, geographical and cultural contexts<sup>66</sup>, the technology of materials and their technical-scientific value<sup>67</sup>. The contextual dimensions of the object in an exhibition context are still being exhausted<sup>68</sup>. However, it is advocated that the representation of a design object should always be contextualised by the appropriate field of knowledge<sup>69</sup>, although institutions can expand beyond their institutional assumptions and reflect on the premises of the design discipline<sup>70</sup>. For the museum interviewees, all dimensions of the inventory are relevant<sup>71</sup>. Still, the chronological recording of the production dates of the designs, prototypes and first editions produced of the object, the knowledge of their authorship, materials, manufacturing methods and the conceptual, historical, aesthetic-artistic, social, and economic values associated with them is fundamental<sup>72</sup>. Mention was also made of the importance of assigning an inventory number by the institutional numbering and nomenclature criteria, briefly describing the object and associating a photograph with it<sup>73</sup>. Attributing and describing the object's typology or function were also considered

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<sup>59</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.

<sup>61</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>62</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>63</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E7-MLS.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E7-MLS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

<sup>66</sup> Interviewees E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>68</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>71</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; and E6-MJV.

<sup>72</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.

<sup>73</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; and E4-FQ.

relevant<sup>74</sup>. The exhibition space is the place par excellence that allows crossing the multiple contexts of information. However, the traditional exhibition model is still predominant, where objects are portrayed as pieces of art and desire<sup>75</sup>. Discourses may vary according to different disciplinary approaches and curatorial programmes, and the different dimensions, once at odds with each other by different epistemologies and disciplinary constraints, may interrelate<sup>76</sup>. Even so, the idea of representing objects in their conceptual dimension, technical/technological process of industrial production, in their authorial dimension, known — individual or collective — or anonymous, and in their dimensions related to the aesthetic-artistic, historical, social, cultural and identity contextual value, always located in their geography of origin, is reinforced<sup>77</sup>, provided that the contexts that differentiate the industrial object from the handmade thing are well situated<sup>78</sup>. Scientific research on objects should be continuous to build different dialogues<sup>79</sup>. The speeches of the interviewees from academia and museums show that the theoretical particularities of the disciplines that work in classification practices condition the ways of documenting<sup>80</sup>. Constructed and established narratives about objects are not dissolved when associated with new descriptions from other disciplinary fields<sup>81</sup>. Objects only seem able to interact in their antagonistic positions and participate in the construction of knowledge when present in exhibition contexts.

Regarding what differentiates objects in the subjectivity of their disciplinary criteria — art, decorative arts, science and technique, fashion, industrial or ethnographic — from an academic point of view, the requirements will always depart from the gaze of the institution and its mediation processes<sup>82</sup>. Once again, it should be remembered that a design object is not the same as an art object<sup>83</sup> since the former is associated with a particular mode of intelligible utilitarian functionality, aesthetic-artistic value, chronological period, market, and consumer value<sup>84</sup>. In contrast, the latter is not associated with a specific function<sup>85</sup> since it configures the individual expression of its author for the consumer's enjoyment<sup>86</sup>. On the other hand, it should also be remembered that the design object is not the same as the handcrafted object due

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<sup>74</sup> Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>76</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; and E8-CC.

<sup>77</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.

<sup>78</sup> Interviewee E8-CC.

<sup>79</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>80</sup> BAL, 1994.

<sup>81</sup> KNELL, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; E2-FS; and E3-FMS.

<sup>83</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>84</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.

<sup>85</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>86</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

to disciplinary classification or institutional interpretation<sup>87</sup>, which distinguishes manual production technology and small-scale production from industrial production technology and the mass production system<sup>88</sup>. However, these divisions should be removed since we are talking about objects and multidisciplinary approaches only favour their understanding<sup>89</sup>. In the museological view, the differentiation of objects is once again reinforced, even if intermittent in its borders, by the reminder of its ontological contexts. For example, the art object invites contemplation, while a design object seeks to solve a problem where function and aesthetics are linked. However, their intersections are not discarded, especially the science and technology and industrial objects<sup>90</sup>; also by the different institutional contexts, although contemporary looks may be admitted<sup>91</sup> since objects are polysemic<sup>92</sup>; and, finally, by the multiple criteria that may be involved in their heritage and musealization process<sup>93</sup>. In the inventory, if the institution is dedicated to the design object, they can be organised according to classes — product, graphic, fashion, digital<sup>94</sup>, in other institutions, they should be concordant with the criteria of value and meaning of their collections since it is these research contexts that position the classifications<sup>95</sup>. Although respondents from academia and museums admit that objects contain numerous biographies, in their material properties and immaterial values, information that is almost always drawn from culturally situated investigations<sup>96</sup>, the conceptualisation of an eclectic model of understanding design objects that would make it possible to establish links between different material dimensions and social contexts with objects that do not belong to the universe of design<sup>97</sup> has not been equated. This void seems to originate, in general, in the slight flexibility of the disciplines to intersect objects from different social and cultural contexts<sup>98</sup>, although they constitute theoretical instruments of analysis<sup>99</sup>, and, above all, in the very clarification of the term object that undoubtedly must be translated in its different narrative constructions, but which should not fail to be thought of as such, namely because it is the material result of the adaptive convergence between nature and human intellect and the evolution of their capacities in the particular circumstances of their life cycles and rhythms, a

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<sup>87</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

<sup>88</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>89</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>90</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>91</sup> Interviewee E8-CC.

<sup>92</sup> Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>93</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; E4-FQ; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.

<sup>94</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>95</sup> Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>96</sup> DUDLEY, *ed.*, 2012; TILLEY, 2013a.

<sup>97</sup> TILLEY *et al.*, *eds.*, 2013b.

<sup>98</sup> MILLER, 2007.

<sup>99</sup> AMBROSE, PAINE, 2006.



process called autopoiesis<sup>100</sup>. In this sense, the idea of the design object, when seen inserted in the criterion of industrialisation, the same should not be dissociated from the contexts of the evolution of human thought and intellectualisation, the contexts of the development of production technology processes and materials technology or the cultural and social contexts of self-adaptation, since they are the mirror of that culture<sup>101</sup>.

From the academic's perspective, documentation is the device that allows organising and mediating the information of the material culture. This organisation may follow more generalist information categories or be guided by disciplinary premises<sup>102</sup>. In any case, it is recommended to use the norms and procedures of official collection management documents designed for museums, which offer suggestions for information standardisation<sup>103</sup>. Other devices for mediating object information were the storytelling technique<sup>104</sup>, research based on the ethnographic method<sup>105</sup> and the exhibition<sup>106</sup>. From a museological perspective, the documentation of information in a collection management system is essential for information to be related<sup>107</sup>, as are the international platforms that organise museum objects in a shared database<sup>108</sup>. The organisation and mediation of information should also be guided by the manuals dedicated to national inventories<sup>109</sup> or by the official museum collection management documents produced internationally<sup>110</sup>. Also valued are the exhibitions, the devices in video format to express the curatorial themes and the models of social representation (live performances and educational services)<sup>111</sup> and the documents associated with the objects, among others, photographs that document their manufacture, technical drawings, prototypes, and documents that make it possible to know the associated social contexts<sup>112</sup>. The inventory sheet is considered a mediation device, as well as the regular scientific research of objects<sup>113</sup>. Other devices to be considered are the technical reserves and the archives and spaces<sup>114</sup>. For both the academic and museum interviewees, good information management on things is essential, which ideally should involve policies, practices and procedures based on international and

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<sup>100</sup> INGOLD, 2012.

<sup>101</sup> INGOLD, 2012; SHANKS, TILLEY, 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.

<sup>103</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>104</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>105</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

<sup>106</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>107</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>108</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>109</sup> Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

<sup>110</sup> Interviewee E1-CS.

<sup>111</sup> Interviewees E4-FQ; and E10-BC.

<sup>112</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>113</sup> Interviewee E6-MJV.

<sup>114</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

national models for the documentation and management of museum collections. These instruments promote interaction between objects and enable the lenses that construct them to be represented in their multiple formats<sup>115</sup>.

Opinions in academia are divided on whether museum information management systems should admit the category design or design object. Museums should document objects equally, i.e., information units are transversal, and the design dimension is framed in their physical characteristics — of the function, utility, and aesthetic-artistic value dimension — so documenting by disciplinary assumptions is likely to result in poor information management<sup>116</sup>. On the other hand, some admit that the term should be contemplated if collection management systems are organised according to disciplinary criteria since a design object is not an art object<sup>117</sup>. The concern of the word being disentangled from its temporal and historical origin is also present. In this sense, the mention of the term makes sense only in design museums<sup>118</sup>. The same doubts and division of opinions occur from the museological perspective. The classification term design object makes sense when associated with design institutions and the contexts of their missions, nature of the collections and selection criteria<sup>119</sup>, but the criteria that circumscribe it to the discipline, when too rigid, may condition its understanding and limit interactions with other objects<sup>120</sup>. Beyond design museums, the term design object should be included in the vocabulary of collection management systems of industrial museums<sup>121</sup>. The resistance to answering this question was also related to the doubt about the term design object. In both academia and museums, the idea prevails that the design object should be contextualised within its theoretical and methodological field of action. Part of this premise stems from the still very solid idea of the classic concept of the design object, which links it to the importance of drawing, the serial industrial process, and the representation of capitalism. Even so, because it deals with material objects that integrate culture and society, the term's polyvalence is admitted in the collection management system. However, in objective terms, the modes of the organisation have yet to be specified<sup>122</sup>.

Regarding how interdisciplinarity between the different theoretical and methodological fields can be achieved, in a scholarly opinion, it should be mediated with the help of documentation and museological assumptions — mission, nature of the collections, objectives — and not by disciplinary assumptions or restrictions<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>115</sup> ROMANO, 2007; BASSI, 2007.

<sup>116</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>117</sup> Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.

<sup>118</sup> Interviewees E2-FS; and E7-MLS.

<sup>119</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; and E6-MJV.

<sup>120</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>121</sup> Interviewees E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E8-CC.

<sup>122</sup> PEARCE, 1990, 1994a.

<sup>123</sup> Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.

Also, through the establishment of partnerships or inter-institutional protocols to develop models of object mediation, which include the participation of different communities and fields of knowledge<sup>124</sup>. Relationships between departments within the same institution are just as crucial as inter-institutional relationships<sup>125</sup>. Some have called this multidisciplinary interpretation analysis model a cross-pollination process, where different areas of knowledge converge to tell something new<sup>126</sup>. However, it was also found that each institutional lens should drive the objects' thinking and that the object's narrative should convey the intended intention. From a critical perspective, design objects should be considered in their design, production, and consumption dimensions. They should denounce, among others, the dimensions related to labour precariousness, human rights, or gender issues<sup>127</sup>. This production of multiple discourses for the objects will imply a repeated updating of the inventory, but institutional contingencies only sometimes allow it<sup>128</sup>. In a museological opinion, interdisciplinarity should be mediated by crossing different databases with converging classification criteria<sup>129</sup>. However, some understand that this interdisciplinary approach should always frame the design object in the context of history<sup>130</sup>, the history of design and the history of technique<sup>131</sup>. And any of these dimensions will always be contingent. It will always be among the multiple possible framings resulting from different investigation mappings<sup>132</sup>. When mediating objects, there are always dimensions that are not considered<sup>133</sup>, and nowadays, design objects are more easily identified and negotiated because they are less rigorous in the way they are thought of<sup>134</sup>. The institutions represented by the interviewees have established research partnerships with other institutions. Their objects are accessed in their collections and archives and thought of from a design perspective<sup>135</sup>, many of which are translated into temporary exhibitions<sup>136</sup>.

The circumscription of objects in specific systems of representation has led to the uniformisation of knowledge and a restriction of new perspectives to think about them<sup>137</sup>. Specifically, about design, the institutional plurality to which the design

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<sup>124</sup> Interviewee E5-AM.

<sup>125</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>126</sup> Interviewee E3-FMS.

<sup>127</sup> Interviewee E2-FS.

<sup>128</sup> Interviewee E7-MLS.

<sup>129</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>130</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; and E6-MJV.

<sup>131</sup> Interviewee E1-CS.

<sup>132</sup> Interviewee E10-BC.

<sup>133</sup> Interviewee E4-FQ.

<sup>134</sup> Interviewee E8-CC.

<sup>135</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.

<sup>136</sup> Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.

<sup>137</sup> WHITEHEAD, 2009: 8; BENNETT, 2018: 6-8; 39.

object is associated necessarily could have produced heterogeneous and polysemic identities. Design, as a concept, discipline, and operational methodology, leans towards a collaborative and transdisciplinary thinking model. This phenomenon takes on a complex set of questions and sets up a field of opportunity to think about new discourses about objects. This new approach to design objects makes it possible to furnish institutions with different approaches, making it enjoyable to presume that some already represent the various facets of design history and culture. However, this coexistence between different disciplinary contexts is not peaceful because material culture is framed by incompatible ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions. The natures of collections have other reasons and purposes, but they all seek to evoke, represent, and transmit knowledge. Their training contexts fluctuate and are intellectualised by different disciplines that incorporate social and cultural ideologies, through which concepts are formulated, experiences are anticipated, and reflections are produced<sup>138</sup>. The constructions of the design object will then be included in some of the actions recommended by the leading institutions whose exhibition models were disseminated and established as a standard for other museums.

This text sought to illustrate some considerations arising from the narratives of Portuguese protagonists from different disciplinary areas concerning the idea of the design object and how it can be thought of from these lenses, both by the academy and museums. Object mediation, both in academia and in museums, still encounters obstacles in the interaction of discourses<sup>139</sup> due to disciplinary models and their rigid boundaries. There is, however, a desire to explore different realities for objects. From time to time, inter-institutional collaborations are established whose research results in temporary exhibitions. However, these models that facilitate the intersection of the information dimensions of objects in their diversity have yet to be clarified<sup>140</sup>. These exploratory interviews in the Portuguese context with committed agents in the areas of museums and design, whose selection criteria were limited to the relevance and notoriety of their contributions to the themes under discussion, were part of a broader research methodology, which included an international conference in Porto dedicated to the musealization of design (presenting the current book some of the considerations presented therein) and a literature review, essentially of museology and design, where we sought to contextualise the object of design in its main paradigms of theoretical understanding, its prominent issues of reflection, and the contextual and narrative dimensions that participate in its perception, with the primary purpose of developing a study model instrument that would guide the questioning, organisation, and knowledge management of its different translations.

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<sup>138</sup> MACDONALD, FYFE, *eds.*, 2005: 6-7.

<sup>139</sup> TABORSKY, 1990.

<sup>140</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, 2000.

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**PART II**  
DESIGN OBJECT  
INTERPRETATION  
IN MUSEUMS



# THE OBJECT MATTER OF MUSEUMS: DESIGNING OTHERWISE

ALICE SEMEDO\*

**Abstract:** *The contemporary theoretical and ethical debate on museums is deeply entangled in the world and built from an intra-active engagement with it. As a consequence, the museum tends to address the emergent and the urgent through situated practices that collectively analyse and respond to circumstances in the world. In doing so, the contemporary museum seeks to create conditions for visitor engagement by empowering their unmediated voices to be heard. This text aims to explore the critical space between the apparent decolonial vitality of the museum and how diffractive practices may be designed in a postcritical and postrepresentational context, arguing that approaches based on artistic and design processes of speculative fabulation (as Design Culture) are helpful for thinking and acting in these spaces of experience. Pragmatically, it highlights three modes of speculative (moderated) design engagement with the present and the future to help museums to break out of their ontological blindness and fulfil their critical and transformative potential.*

**Keywords:** *museum; speculative design and museums; speculative middles; postrepresentational.*

**Resumo:** *O debate teórico e ético contemporâneo em torno dos museus está profundamente enredado no mundo e é construído a partir de um envolvimento intra-ativo com ele. Como consequência, o museu tende a abordar o emergente e o urgente através de práticas situadas que analisam e respondem coletivamente às circunstâncias do mundo. Ao fazê-lo, o museu contemporâneo procura criar condições para o envolvimento dos visitantes, permitindo que as suas vozes não mediadas sejam ouvidas. Este texto pretende explorar o espaço crítico entre a aparente vitalidade decolonial do museu e a forma como as práticas difrativas podem ser concebidas num contexto pós-crítico e pós-representacional, argumentando que as abordagens baseadas em processos artísticos e de design de fabulação especulativa (como a Cultura do Design) são úteis para pensar e agir nestes espaços de experiência. De forma pragmática, destaca três modos de envolvimento especulativo (moderado) do design com o presente e o futuro para ajudar os museus a libertarem-se da sua cegueira ontológica e a concretizarem o seu potencial crítico e transformador.*

**Palavras-chave:** *museu; design especulativo e museus; lugares do meio especulativos; pós-representacional.*

*What is necessary is a radical transformation, following the bases of feminism, anti-racism and anti-fascism. An in-depth transformation around the types of subject that we are. And that can only happen collectively, by redefining the type of world that ours is becoming. That is the plan<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019.

## INTRODUCTION

In these years of new media, globalisation, migrations, and struggles over identity and memory, issues of representation and contestation have intensified in the cultural field and, in particular, in the context of museums. At the same time, the theoretical and ethical debate fostered by the reflexive turn of the last decades is increasingly driven by the concern to recover a sphere of political action for the museum: activist and decolonial in nature, deeply entangled in the world and built from an intra-active engagement with it. As a consequence, the museum tends to address the emergent and the urgent through situated practices that collectively analyse and respond to circumstances in the world. In doing so, the contemporary museum seeks to create conditions for visitor engagement by empowering their unmediated voices to be heard.

This text seeks to explore the critical space between the apparent decolonial vitality of the museum and how these practices are designed in a postcritical and postrepresentational context, arguing that approaches based on artistic and design processes of speculative fabulation are helpful for thinking and acting in these spaces of experience. That is, they are useful to help museums to break out of their ontological blindness to fulfil their critical and transformative potential.

## SETTING THE SCENE. FROM CRITICAL DISTANCE TO CRITICAL PROXIMITY

In 2006 Sharon Macdonald<sup>2</sup> coined the term «representational critique» to describe a critical approach to reflecting on the exclusion of marginalised groups in society from postcolonial and feminist perspectives. This movement of institutional critique paved the way for a representational critique that has taken shape through disruptive curatorial practices. Although issues of representation were not new — since at least the mid-1960s and early 1970s, museums have been confronted with claims associated with the right to self-representation or participation in the construction of the museum — it was mainly since the late 1980s onwards that by the hand of new museology, new institutionalism, cultural studies and poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, we have witnessed a critical reflexive turn that has dissected, in-depth, the conditions of production, structural organisation, knowledge and power in museums, laying bare the associated discourses and their effects.

The overturning of the myth of innocence (or lack thereof) and the realisation that the museum is of the world and not simply in it has revealed opportunities for museum engagement in more profound and more authentic practices of museum

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<sup>2</sup> MACDONALD, *ed.*, 2006.

decolonisation<sup>3</sup>. The second wave of research within museum studies will enhance this connection with the world of practice by directing its gaze towards analysing the poetics and politics of museum practices. In this reorientation of the gaze, the museum has sought to understand and reassess its purposes, ways of knowing and doing. To do so, it employs both theories of change (of itself and of the world) that recognise the museum as a learning organisation and postcritical approaches that adopt participatory and collaborative strategies to engage different subjects and communities in producing knowledge and action in the world. The way this political desire is articulated reflects a projection of the desired social transformations that these museum activist movements aim for in the present.

### Embracing the South

The critique of representation has acted as a critical factor in both this shift in discourse — from a concern with the «object» to a concern with the «subject» and the «process» and its entanglement in the world — and in the radical approaches and political claims on the museum that we are witnessing today. A considerable proportion of this critical look at museum practices focuses on reinventing the relationship between communities and the subjects of the narratives that the museum represents rather than merely continuing to identify how they reproduce hegemonic discourses and representations. The context in which museums serve their communities has changed profoundly. The new museum narrative now seeks to encompass issues ranging from reducing wealth inequality, protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, halting population growth, eliminating fossil fuel use, reversing biodiversity loss to eliminating wasteful consumption. Museums are urged to create visions to address the «big» problems and «big» questions<sup>4</sup> and to integrate principles that advocate social justice into their missions. The urgency to address controversial and difficult topics — *Hot Topics* as Fiona Cameron and Linda Kelly<sup>5</sup> called them —, social injustices and epistemic violence worldwide, the refugee crisis, social inequality, human rights violations, and wars are constantly proclaimed. A plural, contextual and practical knowledge is suggested, one which combines/articulates different types of knowledges with different relevance. This characterisation of knowledge is akin to the conceptualisation advocated by the epistemologies of the South, which, in addition to attention to intercultural translation and the crafting of practices, argue for a heightened awareness of both

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<sup>3</sup> The list of contributions addressing this issue grows every year. Just by way of example, see the book organised by Ariese and Wróblewska, chapter «How to design your own decolonial practice», which explicitly presents design as a strategy of decolonial practice (ARIESE, WRÓBLEWSKA, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> JANES, SANDELL, eds., 2019: 7; VLACHOU, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> CAMERON, KELLY, eds., 2020.

absences and emergencies and an ecology of knowledges<sup>6</sup>. An understanding that admits subjugated and disqualified knowledges, excluded voices, one that is contrary to epistemological exclusions that seek to hide (or even destroy) other forms of knowledge. A knowledge thought as plural, contextual and practical, and redirects the relationship between the museum and society in a spirit of solidarity. Collectively, many of the texts published on the subject illustrate the sense of shared responsibility felt within the global museum community to act with urgency and seek ways to respond meaningfully to the turbulence of the world. Meaningfulness that means moving from «matters of fact» to «matters of concern», that is, addressing controversial conditions deeply entangled in everyday life<sup>7</sup>.

Interest in the worlds of museum practice and performance is growing. These attempts to move beyond questions of representation, reorienting cultural concerns towards performativity and museum-body practices, relate to what Nigel Thrift describes as non-representational theory or practice theory. According to Thrift, the non-representational project refers to the «practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites»<sup>8</sup>. Rather than an obsession with representation and meaning, Thrift argues that non-representational approaches value the performative «presentations», «displays», and «manifestations» of everyday life. Non-representational theory has an affinity with new materialisms, speculative realism and postphenomenology in that it embraces the concept of the agency of things and a decentralised or distributed (museum) subject. Thrift describes non-representational theory as a geography of what happens.

## The museum that happens

These non-representational approaches respond to the critique of the static orientation of representation, now seeking to understand life as emergent and unfolding in a multiplicity of movements and encounters. Instead of sidelining the messy world «out there», the museum includes it, offering it the foreground. Rather than stopping movement — as representation tends to do — non-representational practices seek to move together and in relation to the world. What the museum can become (the

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<sup>6</sup> SANTOS, 2014; AIDAR, CHIOVATTO, AMARO, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In the exhibition opened in 2005, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Bruno Latour and artist-curator Peter Weibel explored the ways in which artists and designers construct systems that express and enact current social conditions and imagine futures. The reflection unfolds in four interrelated theses-themes: contemporary democracy is object-oriented, i.e., it occurs through what we do; it refers to conflicting matters and their consequences; «things» are the association of objects and matters of concern: when what we do is experienced in the light of conflicting matters and the consequences surrounding them, we are living in what Latour calls a kind of «dingpolitik»; and finally, it is about making these «things» (exploring interaction of objects and issues) and organising audiences: groups engaged in addressing a problem (LATOURE, WEIBEL, eds., 2005).

<sup>8</sup> THRIFT, 1997: 142.

process of becoming) is the matter of its entanglements. Entanglements are much larger than the museum itself. The way it touches the world and is affected by it, is, after all, the core of its responsibility. In the museum's diffractive relationship with the world, each museum is also part of the ongoing intra-active articulation. As Barad explains well:

*The phenomenon of diffraction does not merely signify the disruption of representationalism and its metaphors of reflection in the endless play of images and its anxieties about copy and original and displacements of the Same elsewhere. Diffraction is an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. We are not merely differently situated in the world; «each of us» is part of the intra-active ongoing articulation of the world in its differential mattering. Diffraction is a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inherent separability of subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, epistemology and ontology, and material and discursive<sup>9</sup>.*

Thus, the critical enquiry that this movement of articulation/combination presupposes focuses both on dismantling obsolete structures and — mainly — on creating new concepts or tools to navigate the complexity of the present. This approach to the present produces, on the one hand, the awareness of what the museum seeks to cease to be and, on the other, the perception of what it wants to become (and is becoming). Either of these phenomena occurs simultaneously, in a continuous and non-linear time. This happens because, as Rosi Braidotti argues, the strength of the present — and the core of its intelligibility — lies precisely in not wholly coinciding with the here and now. Any of these phenomena occur simultaneously in a non-linear, time-continuum. Synchronisation is never complete because «all human and non-human entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter»<sup>10</sup>. Following Braidotti, we may associate this renewed focus on the process of «becoming a museum» with affirmative ethics<sup>11</sup>. In this process, the creative imagination does not cease to constantly reconnect with past experiences and emotions. However, it does so to reconstitute itself as action in the present and future, thus realising the museum's unrealised potential. In other words, and in terms of approaching the present, I am referring here also to epistemology as a method. A method that takes place in a flow or process of mutation, differentiation or transformation, which is the vital material core of thought. Therefore, epistemology as

<sup>9</sup> BARAD, 2008: 332-333.

<sup>10</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019: 36.

<sup>11</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019: 3.

a method also represents a collective effort to define what the museum can become, an effort that stems not only from critical analysis but also from speculation as a way of going beyond critical analysis per se. Critical analysis is not something we do outside the world or the museum, nor is it exhausted in itself. Mieke Bal explains that the intention of critical analysis concerns the affirmative and authoritarian discourses exercised by and through the museum rather than the museum as an «object». From this point of view, the «museum-object» is a subject, a «subject participating in the construction of theoretical views»<sup>12</sup>. As such, discourse is conceptualised broadly from its multimedialisation, that is, museum discourse (a) includes a set of semiotic and epistemological habits that enable and prescribe ways of communicating and thinking that can also be used by others participating in the discourse; (b) provides a basis for intersubjectivity and understanding; (c) implies epistemological attitudes; (d) includes unexamined assumptions about meaning and the world<sup>13</sup>. Rather than an archaeology of meaning, then, the critical analysis and the speculative exercise proposed here are concerned with museum's cultural practice and the interaction with and through meaning that constitutes it<sup>14</sup> in a web of relations with others, implicating in this practice actions of self-knowledge, historical awareness, connectivity, collective action and the design of radical futures.

### **From reflection to diffraction and the power of the present**

Seeing and thinking diffractively is also action; it is making a difference in the world. Haraway explains how in her view, diffraction works differently from reflection, a metaphor and practice that starts from an imagined original that can be copied. Unlike reflection:

*Diffraction patterns are about a heterogeneous history, not originals. Unlike mirror reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere. Diffraction is a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness at the end of this rather painful Christian millennium, one committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of the Same. I'm interested in the way diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. In this sense, «diffraction» is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings<sup>15</sup>.*

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<sup>12</sup> BAL, 2012: 11

<sup>13</sup> BAL, 2012: 3.

<sup>14</sup> BAL, 2012: 12.

<sup>15</sup> HARAWAY, 2000: 101-102.



The relevance of this diffractive joint action for the museum is that it ceases to understand itself as the sole causal agent and to see the impacts underlying its action as being the effect of its agency alone. That is, by understanding itself as a subject that acts in relation to other subjects and other spaces when it moves, the museum moves «together with», «in relation to», and «through» the joint actions of other subjects and materialities. Also, «becoming world»<sup>16</sup> and thinking in the presence of others creates a space of hesitation and resistance that produces other modes of relationship. In this new understanding, the museum hopes to go beyond the representation of objective values to engage in movements and positions of «curatorial action», «education», and «unpredictability/perhaps»<sup>17</sup>. Rather than seeking consensus and explanations, these movements may well counter the authorised discourses of heritage and open up (vulnerably) to the unpredictability and reimagination of encounters with others in the world.

In these motion places in the middle — «of being among» — it is, therefore, their capacity to affect — to affect and be affected — that is highlighted as a fundamental capacity of the museum. Affect is an active force that invokes the relational links between bodies and things in the world and the ethical responsibility it entails. It is a fluid and dynamic process that is continuously made and remade; it is an energetic outcome of encounters between bodies in particular places<sup>18</sup>. Affect cannot be other than care<sup>19</sup>. Care that attends to these encounters is made up of divergent interests and desires and opens itself vulnerably to concrete needs in the world and to other understandings and ways of knowing and doing, which include feelings and emotions. The capacity to affect is, therefore, a specific capacity of the spaces of practice that render the museum a «lived» context since, as Guattari warns us, affect is life, or, at least, it is what it means to be alive<sup>20</sup>.

The curatorial agency that Nora Sternfeld<sup>21</sup> speaks of enables these lived spaces in which the possibility of changing the visible, the describable and the thinkable — and of intra-action — takes place. These places of encounter and possibility do not cease to engage in criticality, but the focus on action and on what happens in us, in the museum and in the world outside (and on the relationship between these different worlds) gives rise to other questions: of continuities, of flows, of unfoldings. Moreover, attention to the social space that emerges between subjects and the material contexts raises other questions concerning the enabling conditions; that is, the museum does not stop considering representations but equates them

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<sup>16</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> STERNFELD, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> DE RIBA MAYORAL, REVELLES BENAVENTE, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> PAPERMAN, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> GUATTARI, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> STERNFELD, 2013.

now in relation to questions of presence and absence and how these create and transform places; how these entanglements can be enablers of other futures. The question that arises is what methods serve us for these productive enquiries into the middle.

### ***IN MEDIA RES. WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORMS***

In terms of research and action, these *in media res* ecological spaces I have been referring to call for methods of «co-production», «middling», and «following»<sup>22</sup>, «performance», and «presence» that — in tune with the vitality and complexity of the world — can bear witness to its unfoldings. Although the set of methodological tools available for museum research and work has been widely discussed, it has been difficult to go beyond the linguistic forms of expression to fully realise other ways of witnessing these places of experience and adopt configurations that contradict the traditional model of knowledge.

Often, adapted versions of ethnographic work are adopted as the best way to witness the most intangible aspects of museum practices of affect and how they inhabit the different spaces and times that characterise the multiplicity of the non-representational world. At other times, the call to criticality and action leads the museum curator-bricoleur — neither naively humanist nor romantically impulsive<sup>23</sup> — to experiment with hybrid methodological approaches, which include, for example, visual or sensorial methods — in order to accommodate the tensions of language and meaning and circumvent their limiting structures. In this context, arts and design practices are often presented as fertile fields for epistemic disobedience and the decolonisation of the museum. It is not difficult to find scenarios that associate arts-based methods with the use of design approaches and culture — in particular from a design thinking perspective, defined by its human-centred mindset (e.g., empathy; experimentation; holistic approach; problem framing), integrative process and participatory or collaborative methodology — to creatively address and solve complex problems in the museum context<sup>24</sup>. Approaches that aspire to reconfigure workplaces and change internal and external practices by promoting collaborative, reflective and often diffractive practices and a creative, exploratory culture where knowledge is created and re-presented in new ways.

This methodological pluralism is not entirely new. Feminist, queer, decolonising or anti-racist approaches that include affect and the politics of care have long favoured relational modes of knowing and emphasised the need to use creative and inclusive methods in their ways of knowing and doing. Similarly, currents

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<sup>22</sup> TAINEN, KONTTURI, HONGISTO, 2015; ROGOFF, 2016 cited in STERNFELD, 2017: 166.

<sup>23</sup> YARDLEY, 2008: 6.

<sup>24</sup> HELGUERA, HOFF, *org.*, 2011; DIAS *et al.*, 2022.

developing «more-than-human» approaches argue that we should complement the repertoire of humanistic methods (which generate text and talk) with experiential practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and broaden the notion of what constitutes a research subject. These methods are often framed as «participatory», «inclusive», and of «care» and «communion», conceived as generating «access», «agency», «ownership», «solidarity», «responsibility», and «responsiveness in the presence of others». These approaches situate the museum in the context of commitments to epistemological decolonisation and emancipatory and agonistic decolonial practices<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, decolonising involves more than just extending interests and concerns that have been marginalised in dominant museum discourses. I do not doubt that these actions are important, but decolonising the museum also involves challenging the dominant forms, conventions, grammars, and languages through which knowledge about heritage is expressed and produced in museum research and practice.

This is, perhaps, a more radical than a reformist project that is organised less around the struggle — still with colonial contours — for the inclusion and representation of difference and marginalities, but more focused on the agitation and destabilisation of forms — diffuse, naturalised and habitual — that instil prevailing colonial power relations in the museum. One key imperative of decolonial practice is to recognise and respect how ideas, projects, and processes reach «into» and relate «to» particular contexts. This approach recognises that knowledge production is a situated and relational activity; that any approach is a materialisation of an effort to assign meaning to experiential situations; and that the transfer of ideas «to» and «between» different contexts underlies how they affect thought and action. In other words, this project of decolonisation of the museum seeks to emphasise ontologically designed relations rather than an understanding of decolonisation whose project is to pacify, control, erase or occupy (colonise) the situation of which the «other» speaks. To this end, it resists «common denominators» and single frames of reference. Instead, it opts, for example, for the spaces of dissensus that Rancière<sup>26</sup> speaks of or for performative mapping or performative narrative, aspiring to enact relations that respect the ontological differences between bodies, geographies and histories.

Some of the main forces that have transformed and characterised these approaches as a whole — as epistemological and speculative methods of the museum and, in particular, of its relationship with the complexity of the world — are cross-disciplinary and represent a direction for the development of new tools for both internal and external practices: (a) the need to develop and strengthen capacities for

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<sup>25</sup> MOUFFE, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> RANCIÈRE, 2010.

critical-reflexive and creative thinking and multidisciplinary teamwork to engage with complexity; (b) the need to develop ethical, sustainable and future-oriented approaches to imagine otherwise. It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss the nature of these emerging practices in depth. Instead, I want to draw attention to how the thought and principles of speculative fabulation and speculative design — with which I associate speculative places-events in the middle — can support the museum in these oscillatory and productive movements to fulfil its critical and transformative potential.

### **CURATING *MIDDLING*. USING SPECULATIVE METHODS TO EXTERNALISE ETHICS AND POSITIONALITY IN MUSEUM PRACTICE**

Speculative fabulation, as outlined throughout this text, is a tool and material force that interrogates, critiques, and summons (past) futures to imagine them radically different from the world we now inhabit, providing alternative models for how the world — i.e., the museum and its relations to the world — might be reassembled. This is how Haraway describes it in *Staying with the Trouble* when she conceives of it as a «mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding», an approach that pays attention to the conceivable, the possible, the inexorable, the plausible and the logical<sup>27</sup>. These features of speculative fabulation disrupt the usual ways of knowing and provoke new ways of thinking that facilitate the emergence of questions around positionality and ethics and the imagination of different futures. Speculative fabulation has nothing neutral about it. It is, instead, situated, relational, and material (feminist) practice. As Barad emphasises, «“We” are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity»<sup>28</sup> and, as such, speculative fabulation anticipates «a different difference from within»<sup>29</sup>. It is from these places-events situated in the middle that speculative fabulation becomes a response-ability for the creation of the world and a possible method for producing other ecologies in the museum. A capacity that requires, as Haraway states:

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<sup>27</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 213.

<sup>28</sup> BARAD, 2003: 828, italics in the original.

<sup>29</sup> ÅSBERG, THIELE, VAN DER TUIN, 2015: 160.

*the cultivation of viral response-abilities, carrying meanings and materials across kinds in order to infect processes and practices that might yet ignite epidemics of multispecies recuperation and maybe even flourishing on terra in ordinary times and places. Call that utopia; call that inhabiting the despised places; call that touch; call that the rapidly mutating virus of hope, or the less rapidly changing commitment to staying with the trouble<sup>30</sup>.*

Still in this line, the concept of «speculative middles» used by the researchers Springgay and Truman to talk about the approaches they use in their research-creation projects is useful here to understand not only how these events happen but also the kind of events raised by the queries of speculative fabulation. For the authors, it is not about creating places as such, but events, events in which tensions, restlessness and ruptures seem to emerge continuously and during which «As the agitations take shape, it is the (in)tensions that incite further action, which elicits additional propositions, and new speculative middles to emerge»<sup>31</sup>. It is precisely these (in)tensions/actions that give body to the ethical-political orientation of what happens in these events-places in the middle, generating, after all, a practice that places the museum «in the presence of those who will bear their consequences»<sup>32</sup>. The recognition that there are others who will «bear the consequences» of the material practices of thinking, writing, and doing the museum is an important «node» that we can borrow from Haraway's feminist speculative fabulation. In these speculative place-events, rather than seeking solutions, problems are experienced, and it is this problematisation that becomes a mode of unlearning. Unlearning is necessary to interrupt habits, tropes and assumptions about what the museum is and what it can be and cultivate «response-ability»<sup>33</sup>. Speculation necessarily starts from questions to cultivate that ability to respond. Questions that compel the museum to create conditions for conversation and to engage with the world. Haraway asks us to develop response-abilities through the creation and sticky knots that connect «intra-acting critters, including people, together in the kinds of response and regard that change the subject — and the object»<sup>34</sup>. These encounters generate a change in the museum because when the museum «knows», it can no longer «stop knowing», and only by knowing can it develop its capacity to respond<sup>35</sup>. This is a responsibility of the practices of the world, a responsibility that includes the materiality of thought, the relations and politics of how the museum

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<sup>30</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 114

<sup>31</sup> SPRINGGAY, TRUMAN, 2018: 207.

<sup>32</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 12.

<sup>33</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 35.

<sup>34</sup> HARAWAY, 2008: 287.

<sup>35</sup> HARAWAY, 2008: 287.

distributes its speculative attention in terms of what it chooses to write, quote, circulate and produce, the words it uses, stories it tells, and histories it hears, to «whom» and «what» it pays attention and what/who it inevitably excludes within these affirmative practices. Haraway warns that «It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories»<sup>36</sup>.

## RE-TOOLING AND RE-TELLING AND RE-PRESENTING MUSEUM MAGIC: CULTURES OF DESIGN

The concerns enunciated — namely in terms of practices in the world and their responsiveness (response-abilities) — and the potential for events of speculative fabulation to think outwardly are shared with the world of art and design culture. Victor Margolin states that:

*Designers, like everyone else on the planet, have good reason to be concerned about the future. The world is volatile, and the ability of the human race to make a healthy home for itself is at stake. Threats from global warming, poor nutrition, disease, terrorism, and nuclear weapons challenge the potential of everyone to exercise productive energies for the common good*<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, it will be no accident that design practices are also on the front line when it comes to finding alternative metaphors to current circumstances. The crises of the beginning of the millennium have produced a renewed impetus for social and activist design and how to approach the challenges of contemporary society and the world<sup>38</sup>. In an essay published in 2008, Andrew Blauvelt defined the third major phase of modern design history as an era of relationally-based, contextually-specific design. These new relational design practices include performative, pragmatic, programmatic, process-oriented, open, experimental and participatory elements, and the very nature of design «has broadened from giving form to discrete objects to the creation of systems and more open-ended frameworks for engagement: designs for making designs»<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, he adds, this new phase is concerned with the effects of design that extend beyond the design object and even its cultural connotations and symbolism. This recently adopted perspective also presents it as a prospective activity that combines deductive and

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<sup>36</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 35.

<sup>37</sup> MARGOLIN, 2007: 4.

<sup>38</sup> BIELING, *ed.*, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> BLAUVELT, 2008.

abductive reasoning. It deals with complex problems by accessing yet-to-be or not fully-formed areas<sup>40</sup>. That is to say, it is based on potentialities rather than certainties; it is partial and in the process of becoming. It starts from «knowledge for» actions and, in this sense, at its core, it is directional and transformative and is concerned more with how things «should be»<sup>41</sup> rather than how things actually are. In this vein, the more artistically oriented critical design approaches<sup>42</sup> and associated variants — design fiction and speculative design — seem to have found a critical visible space, especially regarding research and participation in curatorial experiments. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby popularised the field of Speculative and Critical Design, making it a central focus of the now discontinued *Design Interactions* programme (2005-2015) at the Royal College of Arts. Their approach still resonates in current art and design practices today. Dunne and Raby explain that their speculative practice:

*thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely*<sup>43</sup>.

Speculative approaches in design aim to open up various pluralities and distortions by focusing on some unlikely, but not difficult to predict, dimensions of the future. What separates speculative practices from conventional design practices is the idea of presenting fictions that extends established conventions, be they physical, social or political. In the same way that Karen Barad's agential realism implies rethinking the responsibilities of «being in» and «being part of» the world, the narratives of future perspectives proposed by Speculative Design prompt it to adopt a critical stance. Although Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Pedro Vieira de Oliveira do not argue against speculative design — as a principle —, they underline that despite criticism, it is still too Western, too masculine, too upper-middle class, too hetero-normative<sup>44</sup>. From this point of view, speculative design seems to be disconnected from the present, existing in its own speculative bubble, outside the present and somewhere in the future. This positioning makes any meaningful form of direct engagement difficult and subordinates it to a reflexive point of view which is not of interest here.

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<sup>40</sup> CRAMER-PETERSEN, CHRISTENSEN, AHMED-KRISTENSEN, 2019; GALDON, HALL, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> SIMON, 1996: 111-167 cited in GALDON, HALL, 2022: 924.

<sup>42</sup> Speculative design often appears associated with critical design, sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes used together, as in «speculative and critical design».

<sup>43</sup> DUNNE, RABY, 2013: 2.

<sup>44</sup> MARTINS, OLIVEIRA, 2014.

Indeed, these critiques have encouraged other forms of speculative design-making, leading to greater engagement in practices of conjecture «with» and «through» design, intentionally, explicitly feminist, queer or non-colonialist<sup>45</sup>. It is suggested, for example, that thinking in terms of «Design Culture» rather than speculative design may better frame speculative places-events in the middle that — perhaps in conjunction with arts-based approaches — are more diffractive. Moreover, as Julier argues<sup>46</sup>, the notion of Design Culture allows us to overcome the criticism directed at speculative design of moving away from the everyday and sequestering in the more exclusive world of galleries or artistic publications, to act, instead, in the middle — a kind of everyday experimentalism — maintaining a closer relationship of reality checking<sup>47</sup>. Another aspect to consider in this reflection concerns the possibility of interrelating this practice of speculative design with social design and participatory design approaches<sup>48</sup>. In other words, and following Julier's proposal, when I refer here to a design culture in the context of these events of speculative fabulation, I am not necessarily referring to the production of new objects. Instead, I highlight three modes of pragmatic speculative (moderated) design engagement with the present and the future that support the transformation of the museum and the imagination of other possibilities:

- First, in terms of understanding the museum (from object of fact to subject and matter of dissensus; from «matter of fact» to «matter of concern» in Latour's call<sup>49</sup>), drawing attention to and opening critical perspectives on its materialities, disturbing its entanglements, potentiating other readings and, by doing so, making them more refractive. It is still a speculative effort since the results of these events are unknown.
- Second, more downstream and as a starting point, the use of proposals developed by communities in these spaces-events and their socio-material implications for the museum: which museum would result from these proposals? What new relationships and forms of exchange, objects, places, and experiences would they give rise to? What new relationships and forms of exchange, objects, places, and experiences would they give rise to? These kinds of speculative events in the middle would engage participants in these design culture processes in acts of modelling or prototyping to materialise and test ideas. Julier says that it is precisely in this kind of action that design culture would adhere to prefigurative politics and, in doing so, act as a knowledgeable and reflexive (or even potentially

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<sup>45</sup> MARTINS, OLIVEIRA, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> JULIER, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> JULIER, 2022: 221.

<sup>48</sup> DISALVO, 2022: 241.

<sup>49</sup> LATOUR, 2005.



diffractive) space to test knowledge and demonstrate and explore the viability of alternative futures<sup>50</sup>.

- Finally, a third way of designing events of speculative fabulation with/for/in/for... museum/others in the world refers to the participation of design culture in predicting what the museum can be, working alongside it in observing and analysing realities to then build other possible ones<sup>51</sup>.

This proposal implies that speculation is used as a way to activate a trajectory capable of provoking discourses on the desirability of the museum we want in the future. That is, to create a multiplicity of visions of the museum's relationship with the world, suspending disbelief, playing with the uncertainty of the future and the urgency to produce collective imaginaries capable of directly stirring the museum's present instead of offering mere future projections. This entanglement represents a direct intervention in the present, or, as Barad would say, a performative point of view:

*Unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being<sup>52</sup>.*

This entanglement adopts a diffractive methodology that is also a critical practice of engagement and critical consciousness of the museum with the world<sup>53</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

These days, the museum's main site of intervention is the gap opened between the museum and audiences — a space that instigates a new civic imagination and collective political will. It is not enough to give the museum the task of merely revealing its stories of injustice and exclusion. It is essential that the museum be instrumental in transcending these stories to develop a more functional set of actions that can reconnect the museum to the urgency of everyday life. It is through and in the movements of practice — acts of thinking, doing, performing, and creating — that the museum opens itself up to the «accidental sagacity» of serendipity and relationality<sup>54</sup>. It is, therefore, not just a matter of cultivating reflexivity (which aims only at representation) but

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<sup>50</sup> JULIER, 2022: 221.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, HOPKINS BROCO, HOFSTEE, JESUS, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> BARAD, 2003: 802-831.

<sup>53</sup> HARAWAY, 2000: 101-102.

<sup>54</sup> LEDERACH, 2005.

of activating reflexivity and criticality in terms of agency, engagement and presence in the world. In this shift to a «post-representational» landscape, it is, therefore, the impacts — understood as the movement of something that affects and is affected — and positionality of curatorial practice-positionality not in terms of fixed identity but of its location within shifting networks of relations<sup>55</sup> — that are at stake.

I have been drawn to the world of design to think about the possibility of creating speculative place-events in the middle as thought experiments for exploring the dilemmas of the world and its possibilities: «Thought experiments can make abstract issues tangible and demonstrate a point, entertain, illustrate a puzzle, lay bare a contradiction in thought, and move us to provide further clarification»<sup>56</sup>. Thought experiments are designed as windows into the fundamental nature of things and reveal something philosophically illuminating or fundamental about the issue at hand. It is argued that fabulation and speculative design approaches in the middle (as Design Culture) can be used as catalysts to initiate, facilitate and support new kinds of conversations — conversations conducted at different scales, driven by different and divergent agendas. In this case, the production of places-events uses design and artistic approaches as a tool of philosophical enquiry, which promotes responsiveness to know and do differently. It is not, therefore, mere speculation per se that is advocated here. It is a narrative of things, experiences, and interactions — tangible engagements that collectively cast the possibility or impossibility of what might happen (not-yetness). Meaning is constructed in, between and through these material and experiential manifestations. It is in these movements of reciprocity between things and actions that lies the ability to see, to recognise the potential, the value, and what the museum has for those involved. The approaches developed within speculative fabulation have the ability to drive and extract these qualities using the language of art and design to build other kinds of engagements, exchanges and understandings of the future. This is where the value of speculative design lies: in the middle, in the ability to unlearn and propose other possibilities, relationships and worlds.

*Let's dance, let's dance, let's dance, let's dance, let's dance*

*Why, why, why!?*

*Love, love, love, love, love*

*Under Pressure, David Bowie & Queen*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> MAHER, TETREAUULT, 2001: 164.

<sup>56</sup> CACCAVALE, SHAKESPEARE, 2014: 27.

<sup>57</sup> Listen to this song at <<https://open.spotify.com/track/2fuCquhmrzHpu5xcA1ci9x>>.

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# DESIGNER MAKER USER: DEVELOPING INTERPRETATION FOR THE NEW DESIGN MUSEUM, LONDON\*

HELEN CHARMAN\*\*

**Abstract:** *On 24 November 2016, the Design Museum opened in its new location in Kensington, west London — the culmination of a ten-year capital project to create a new type of museum of design for the twenty-first century. Three times the size of its former site on Shad Thames, the new museum has a democratic vision «to inspire everyone to understand the value of design». This vision is underpinned by three core messages: that design is everywhere, that it is for everyone, and that it shapes and improves lives. Communicating the vision is a curatorial endeavour at its core. This endeavour is realised through the interpretative language expressed in the free permanent display Designer Maker User; the temporary exhibitions; and the learning, public engagement and research activities. Underpinning the museum's mission is the democratic impulse of its vision — emphasising the ubiquity and inclusiveness of design.*

**Keywords:** *design; curating; interpretation; learning; audience.*

**Resumo:** *A 24 de novembro de 2016, o Design Museum abriu na sua nova localização em Kensington, no oeste de Londres — o culminar de um projeto capital de dez anos para criar um novo tipo de museu de design para o século XXI. Com três vezes a dimensão do seu antigo local em Shad Thames, o novo museu tem uma visão democrática «para inspirar todos a compreenderem o valor do design». Esta visão é sustentada por três mensagens centrais: que o design está em todo o lado, que é para todos, e que molda e melhora vidas. Comunicar a visão é um esforço curatorial no seu âmago. Este esforço é realizado através da linguagem interpretativa expressa na exposição permanente gratuita Designer Maker User; nas exposições temporárias; e nas atividades de aprendizagem, envolvimento público e investigação. Subjacente à missão do museu está o impulso democrático da sua visão — enfatizando a ubiquidade e a inclusividade do design.*

**Palavras-chave:** *design; curadoria; interpretação; aprendizagem; público.*

On 24 November 2016, the Design Museum opened in its new location in Kensington, west London — the culmination of a ten-year capital project to create a new type of museum of design for the twenty-first century. Three times the size of its former site on Shad Thames, the new museum has a democratic vision «to inspire everyone to understand the value of design». This vision is underpinned by three core messages: that design is everywhere, that it is for everyone, and that it shapes and improves lives. Communicating the vision is a curatorial endeavour at its core.

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This endeavour is realised through the interpretative language expressed in the free permanent display *Designer Maker User*; the temporary exhibitions; and the learning, public engagement and research activities. Underpinning the museum's mission is the democratic impulse of its vision — emphasising the ubiquity and inclusiveness of design.

Focusing on the interpretation approach developed for the permanent display *Designer Maker User*, this paper explores how the museum made the transition from being a specialist, paid entry offer in Shad Thames to its new incarnation as a more inclusive and accessible museum of design — with a threefold increase in visitor number targets. The transition from the former site to the new one was itself a design process which entailed a fresh approach to the display and interpretation of designed objects. Following design thinking principles, the challenge came first, and was reframed as a project: «the project is the vehicle that carries an idea from concept to reality»<sup>1</sup>. How could the museum create a permanent display of twentieth century and contemporary design drawing on the museum's collection that was accessible and inspirational? How can it develop an exhibition that is grounded in the everyday vernacular of design, without assuming any prior knowledge of design practice or history on the part of the visitor? Three stages were involved in addressing the problem, led by the Senior Curator Alex Newson with formative inputs from consultancies as the need arose. For the purposes of this paper, these stages are captured in a reversal of the title of the permanent display to reflect the user-centric approach of the project: hence *User, Maker, Designer*. In discussing the content of the display, I draw extensively on conversations with Newson.

## FIRST, USER

Central to the permanent display project was a need to understand the interests and expectations of the user — i.e., current, and prospective audiences. This involved addressing questions of relevance, of how to curate a display that would be meaningful to visitors, and how to give them insight into the ubiquity and impact of design on everyday life. Phase One of the capital project, which started in 2011, saw an intensive and sustained consultation process that would continue across the life of the capital project, with curatorial content and approaches regularly tested. This close engagement and conversation with visitors culminated in the direct input by audiences through the crowd-sourced wall of design that stands at the entrance to the permanent collection display.

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<sup>1</sup> BROWN, 2009.





Fig. 1. Crowd Sourced Wall, entrance to *Designer Maker User*

Source: Design Museum, London

This process of developing visitor- or user-centred interpretation finds theoretical co-ordinates drawn from visitor studies in the museum field. It is not an innovation in theory but is yet to become an orthodoxy in curatorial practice.

*Our mission is to educate. We cannot do that if we are not serving visitors. We cannot survive if we are not assessing and satisfying the needs of our constituents<sup>2</sup>.*

In essence, the project was to develop and inculcate a new model of design object interpretation. The aim was to move away from a heavy focus on discipline, and to avoid making implicit assumptions about the «design capital» of visitors — by which I mean, a body of design history knowledge and design literacy gained through higher education and cultural milieu. Audience research at the former Design Museum revealed that 67% of visitors were specialists, either working, teaching or studying design. For the new museum, the ambition was to develop a programme

<sup>2</sup> HILL in PITMAN, 1991.

that made no assumptions about visitors' a priori knowledge and understanding of design. This shift is manifest elsewhere in the field of curation in new modes of thematic collection display which dismantle a perceived singular authority of the grand collection narrative — often realised chronologically or by discipline — to offer a variety of more accessible and inclusive ways in to understanding<sup>3</sup>, or alternatively through new approaches to interpretation that enable the generation and production of cultural meanings from the perspective of the individual visitor<sup>4</sup>.

In the research into comparator institutions and their permanent displays, Tate Modern's radical rethink and thematic representation of their collection upon opening in 2000 was the most resonant with what the Design Museum aimed to achieve. This approach eschewed chronology and discipline in favour of broadly accessible themes. Literature in museum studies positions such approaches as a challenge to the modernist museum project. This project places emphasis on one-way transmission of factual information, arising from specialist knowledge, to a nominal museum visitor. This visitor is viewed as an «empty vessel» to be filled with knowledge — irrespective of their own life experiences, and divorced from the real world, local contexts that informed the conception, production and reception of content<sup>5</sup>. Curatorial orthodoxies exist in curating design: Professor Jonathan Woodham, in his conference keynote, described one such orthodoxy as a form of «moral didacticism» expressed as a curatorial mission to improve taste, through a common sharing of iconic objects amounts to something akin to a «canonisation» of design. I use that term advisedly to suggest both the creation of a canon of design across the twentieth century (Woodham's example being the ubiquity of the Olivetti 1969 red Valentine Typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass and found in design collections worldwide irrespective of local contexts) and simultaneously, an elevation of status of these objects to something akin to that of sainthood or at least a modicum of godliness — by which is meant, good taste. This deracination of content eschews the nuts and bolts of real world, local context and the messiness of the business context of design. In the case of the Valentine (a plastic case, with a matte finish, designed to be as durable as possible) this real world context is expressed through the tussle between Olivetti's drive to maintain brand reputation and quality with the designer's impulse towards democratisation and ubiquity through offering a low cost affordable price point. Olivetti won. Woodham proposed an alternative museum narrative on the Valentine in which interpretation would not fight shy of Sottsass's own reflection on the piece as a failure. As the designer recounts:

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<sup>3</sup> LANG, REEVE, WOOLLARD, *eds.*, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> BLACK, 2005; SIMON, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, 2000.

*I worked sixty years of my life, and it seems the only thing I did is this fucking red machine. And it came out a mistake. It was supposed to be a very inexpensive portable, to sell in the market, like pens... Then the people at Olivetti said you cannot sell this<sup>6</sup>.*

Rethinking the agency of the permanent display in the museum context is a provocative undertaking — especially when it disrupts established ways of working:

*Audience research can be an irritant to those curators accustomed to developing the museum product as they see fit. It can also provoke resistance where it challenges prefigured beliefs and assumptions<sup>7</sup>.*

For the new Design Museum, adopting the language of a design project which places the user at the centre was a way of navigating this audience development process by framing curating within the practice of the discipline. Audience research could be understood as design behaviour that seeks to get under the skin of the visitor to understand better their interests and motivations. Audience development activity comprised a series of audience consultation fora across 2011-2015. The museum worked with groups from its main visitor constituencies to develop and test approaches to design curation. These constituencies included families, students, teacher and tutors, designers and general adult visitors, with a balance between existing visitors and prospective visitors. The consultation sessions usually lasted 3 hours and were designed and facilitated by colleagues trained in visitor consultation working alongside the curatorial team. Each session was structured around a series of different elements to test; for example, different perspectives or tone of voice used in textual interpretation, or different approaches to interactive activities ranging from low-fi analogue to more involved digital formats. A continuous feedback loop was maintained between the consultations and the curatorial and learning teams, so that content and approaches could be refined and tested on an on-going basis.

Alongside the programme of audience, the museum commissioned a substantive piece of work on audience development by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, a strategic research consultancy working within the culture, heritage, leisure, media and charities sectors. This work, essentially an exercise in audience segmentation using MHM's «culture segments» model, was used alongside qualitative insight from the audience fora and demographic research carried out by Audiences London, to build up a

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<sup>6</sup> ETTORE SOTTASS, 1993 in LARSEN, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> BLACK, 2005:10.

picture of the type of interpretative approaches that would best deliver the museum's mission to inspire everyone to understand the value of design today.

## **SECOND, MAKER**

The steering group undertook extensive field research activity into how comparator institutions were curating permanent displays of design. Underpinning this was the equivalent of a «literature review» of curatorial approaches worldwide to exhibiting design, commissioned from the design studio From Now On. Additionally the museum worked with a consultancy, Tim Gardom Associates, to develop an interpretation tool kit that would enable the transformation of the material culture of design into powerful and impactful experiences that would engage, inform and inspire visitors by presenting content in ways that were relatable to the lives, experiences and expectations of visitors.

Field research revealed that many design collections tended to be part of larger collections of fine art or decorative art, or even science. This tended to influence how the collections were displayed and interpreted — often as a fetishizing of the object itself, with a series of designed objects placed on plinths and displayed as sculpture, co-opting the language of display from a fine art context — an area explored elsewhere<sup>8</sup>. Other collections tended to place a heavy emphasis on the history and chronology of design. All of these approaches are valid and, in many cases, suited the exquisiteness of the exhibits and the collections. However, the museum's focus was to be about the impact of the designs rather than on the designs themselves. In many cases the most important aspect wasn't the object itself but the story it told, with the user at the centre of this story.

We looked most closely at Tate Modern in London, where I had worked as Senior Curator in the Education Department from prior to opening in 2000 until 2006. When Tate Modern first opened in 2000, collections were presented thematically rather than chronologically or accordingly to schools or disciplines. This decision was unusual — and vaguely controversial — at the time. However, it has subsequently proven to be hugely successful and enabled a new generation of people to connect with contemporary art.

Surprisingly we didn't find any examples of design collections presented thematically. There were plenty of examples of temporary exhibitions, but no permanent collection displays. That provided us with our challenge — our design project. The basic premise for our resultant thematic approach is that design is a process carried out by people, for people. And at its heart is a dialogue between three key participants: the designer, the maker and the user. The display comprises objects

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<sup>8</sup> CHARMAN in FARRELLY, WEDDELL, 2016.

from the collection, loaned items, graphics, video and specially devised interactive installations. It tells a number of stories from different viewpoints — technological, social, from the domestic to the geopolitical. The overall triadic concept «Designer Maker User» provides a useful starting point, giving visitors a frame of reference to understand the range of experiences and ideas that they will be encountering. Curation puts the visitor at centre stage, preferring a design-centred, audience-focused approach to an object-focused one. The narrative therefore takes precedence over the object. The notion of understanding visitors as users is also indicative of the museum's ambition to situate the museum as a learning resource for visitors, one that can be returned to repeatedly, fostering long term, sustained engagement.

We wanted visitors to appreciate that every product and service they use has been designed. How did they get to the museum? Did they use a bicycle, a bus or a train? Did they find their way using a website or a map? When they chose their clothes that morning were they influenced by a weather report on their phone or a style they saw on Instagram? If they did any of these things, then they were using a designed service or product.

Loosely speaking, the exhibition is divided into three separate sections, each dedicated to one of these different perspectives. However, there is also the sense that this is a messy and continually shifting conversation. Previously there was separation between these different perspectives whereas as today, digital technologies have torn down these boundaries, allowing a single person to be designer, maker and user — all from the comfort of their bedroom.

The designer zone was the hardest one to resolve: the aim was to demonstrate the scope and scale of the role of a designer. If we were doing this exhibition 100 years ago, we might have a display of silver, then a display of ceramics, then a display of glassware. If we were doing it twenty years ago, we might have had a display of graphic design, a display of architecture, a display of fashion. Both of these approaches felt wrong. We were trying to get people to look beyond design being defined by rigid disciplines. We wanted to say that design is a process and a way of thinking, and so the opening section greets visitors with a quote from Ernesto Rogers from 1952, in which he referenced how in a typical day a Milanese architect would turn their attention from designing a spoon, a chair and a lamp to working on a skyscraper: *dal cucchiaino alla città* («from the spoon to the city»). The spatial ordering of the display reverses this to take visitors from the city to the spoon, but the concept remains the same — an evocation of the scope and scale of design.

The zone starts with the city and architecture. Objects include a model of a gerberette from the Centre Pompidou sprayed orange — to signal it is a model, not an exact replica. Next to this is a display about city transport schematics demonstrated through the metro maps of the London Underground — one of the most iconic



**Fig. 2.**  
Installation shot of the model of the gerberette  
in the Designer section  
Source: Design Museum, London

design features of London — and New York’s rejected map by Vignelli; then around the corner the front of the new tube train designed by Priestman Goode, with accompanying multimedia content.

The entrance to the permanent display takes visitors through a timeline corridor that has a video triptych at the end. The timeline wasn’t in the original curatorial plan, but audiences consistently told us that providing co-ordinates for historical context was a necessary component, hence its inclusion. Across the whole exhibition there is a rich vocabulary of interpretative approaches in evidence: text, moving image, audio, digital interactives, analogue activities, with a curatorial tone of voice that is propositional, straightforward, at times provocative, and gives voice to the three constituents comprising the three elements of the display.

This section concludes with a schematic installation of Margarete Schütte-Lihotsky’s so-called *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926). The piece was commissioned as an installation, rather than undertaking a loan of the original (in so far as a mass manufactured design can ever have an original — but that is a matter for another paper) in order that visitors could enter the kitchen and experience the key spatial dynamics of the design. A quote by Schütte-Lihotsky positions the design in its socio-



**Fig. 3.**  
Schematic installation  
of the Frankfurt Kitchen  
Source: Design Museum, London

-political context and underlines the rationale for this curatorial decision: «women's struggle for economic independence and personal development meant that the rationalization of housework was an absolute necessity».

The final exhibits in this section, positioned on the end wall of the installation, are some of the prototypes and finished product for the S'Up Spoon. This is a piece of cutlery designed originally for an individual, Grant Douglas, as a culinary tool that would enable him to eat liquid foods with minimal spillage and with dignity. It is also of benefit to others with cerebral palsy, Parkinson's, essential tremor and shaky hands.

### **THIRD, DESIGNER**

The 2D and 3D elements of the display were designed by Studio Myerscough, in an iterative process underpinned by insights from the user and maker phases, testing and building on feedback loops.

Alongside audience development initiatives, the museum at Shad Thames had experimented with three alternative design approaches to the permanent display. The first, *This is Design* in 2011, set out to test the idea of using thematics in the context of a permanent display, on a neutral background borrowed from the language of

the white cube. Thematics included: Innovations in Manufacturing and Materials using the chair as a typology; Identity — personal and corporate; Sustainability and Consumption; Digitisation and Miniaturisation; and Design Archetypes. This thematic approach provided the blueprint to some extent for a more worked up iteration for *Designer Maker User*, in response to the need for accessibility and the appeal to a mainstream, non-design specialist audience.

The second iteration of the permanent display was entitled *Extraordinary Stories About Ordinary Things*. It had mixed success with non-specialist visitors as interpretation took the perspective of a modernist design disciplinary context rather than focusing on use or impact. However, a central area activity table that offered visitors the opportunity to respond to design briefs and became a programming hub for light touch talks and demonstrations was very popular. Building on this, the third iteration of the permanent display, *Collection Lab*, took the concept of the dialogue between the three groups and tested the proposition of design as process as the key curatorial concept. In so doing, it introduced the language of the studio into the display. Interpretation was based on the user perspective rather than on design history. Building on visitor feedback, there were more opportunities for visitors to respond to content for example in voting activities, and an area with a range of hands-on activity, for example, looking at different material properties. Overall the curatorial voice was more propositional and discursive than in the preceding iterations, and empowered visitors to see their perspectives and their voice in the design process and understand that as consumers they had some agency in the role and value of design.

*Collection Lab* was designed by Studio Myerscough, who went on to design *Designer Maker User*. The relationship between Senior Curator Alex Newson and Studio Myerscough was a genuinely creative collaboration. When exhibiting design, both 2D and 3D environments take on a particular resonance for the visitor. Each are design disciplines in and of themselves, meaning that the experience of the exhibition as a whole is part of the curatorial narrative and shapes visitor experience sensorially and emotionally. The 2D and 3D design decisions within an exhibition environment are as integral and intrinsic to the visitor experience as the «content» of the exhibition or display.

For the new Design Museum, Studio Myerscough's brief was to design the display in conversation with the architecture of the building, encompassing the new interior designed by John Pawson and the retained and refurbished original architecture of the former Commonwealth Institute. This is of particular note given the permanent display's position underneath the museum's sweeping hyperbolic paraboloid roof. In designing *Designer Maker User*, conceptual and physical coherence was particularly important; enabling the integration of architecture, way finding and design content. Studio Myerscough's design solution was to create a space in contrast to the fully



enclosed «black boxes» of the two temporary exhibition galleries. The exhibition design works as a synthesis with the architectural design and way-finding works to provide a satisfying sequence of architectural experiences from entry into the atrium up to the display on the top floor. In this context, the design brief posited a difference between a museum that shows contemporary art (where the exhibits' primary relationship is often with the architecture of the building) and other kinds of museums (where the exhibits' primary relationship is with the setting of the exhibit of which they form part). In *Designer Maker User*, exhibits are placed within elements that support the display, and are organised in such a way as to address the architecture of the building, in particular the roof and the second smaller void that opens up views onto the office reception space and Sackler Library and Archive. The permanent display has a clear relationship with the public spaces of the museum: it is visible from all publicly accessible spaces.

*Designer Maker User* ends by returning the visitor to the centre of the design process. A more worked up, but still very low-fi, analogue version of the hands-on table first tested in *Extraordinary Stories about Ordinary Things* creates a *Work in Progress* zone. Visitors are invited to respond to a selection of design briefs, and to share their design solutions with other visitors by displaying them on the wall.

Adjacent to the permanent display is the museum's residency studio for the Designers in Residence programme. For 8 months of the year, this is a working studio



Fig. 4. Work in Progress table, *Designer Maker User*  
Source: Design Museum, London

hosting a group of early career designers as part of an Arts Council of England-supported initiative to nurture the next generation of creative professionals. For the remaining four months it is a display space for the residents to show their work. The studio's location works to underline one of the museum's key messages — that design is a process, and about people rather than things.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rethinking design object interpretation in the museum context is predicated on understanding the intimate relationship between exhibition curating and visitor experience. It is complex and nuanced, framed by tensions between the museum's commitment to public access, its responsibility towards the care of collections for the purposes of scholarship and posterity<sup>9</sup> and the institutional business model to which footfall through exhibitions is a key contributor. In its first year since opening, visitor numbers to the museum were 780,000 — significantly exceeding its annual target of 650,000 visitors, with the majority of people going to the permanent display. Average dwell time is double what was anticipated, suggesting that the display has achieved its aim of appealing to a wider audience constituency than at its former location on Shad Thames. New visitor research is currently being collated in order to inform qualitative insight and the display's further development. While there is room for development in the interpretative approach based on visitor feedback and the ever-changing external context (in particular, the implications of a post-Brexit UK on the tourist economy and funding landscape) — the museum's user-centred, experiential and story-led curatorial approach demonstrably meets user need — the first and last principle of design thinking.

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<sup>9</sup> MCCLELLAN, 2003.

# PANEL «MUSEALIZATION OF DESIGN», ROUND TABLE AT THE CLOSING SESSION OF THE CONGRESS *DESIGN OBJECTS: MUSEALIZATION, DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION*, WITH THE GUESTS BÁRBARA COUTINHO (MUDE) AND JOSÉ BÁRTOLO (CASA DO DESIGN), MODERATED BY FRANCISCO PROVIDÊNCIA (ID+/UA)

FRANCISCO PROVIDÊNCIA\*

**Abstract:** *Bárbara Coutinho, director of Mude, Museu do Design e da Moda, under the responsibility of Lisbon City Council, and José Bártolo, director of Casa do Design, under the responsibility of Matosinhos City Council, both with significant experience concerning research and curatorship in Design exhibitions, agreed to participate in a round table moderated by Francisco Providência, designer with museographic experience and investigator at ID+ Instituto de Investigação em Design, Media e Cultura, to discuss the theme of Design Musealization, that has been attracting growing public interest. Given the impossibility to be present, Bárbara Coutinho was represented by a text reflecting on the subject, initiating the session with the commented presentation of several research and exhibiting projects from José Bártolo. In the closing session of the congress, guests converged into a critical model that, starting from material collections, expresses an intention mostly of political and social projection, according to Bárbara, while mostly historical and social, to Bártolo.*

**Keywords:** *museology; museography; design; Casa do Design; MUDE.*

**Resumo:** *Bárbara Coutinho, diretora do MUDE, Museu do Design e da Moda, sob a responsabilidade da Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, e José Bártolo, diretor da Casa do Design, sob a responsabilidade da Câmara Municipal de Matosinhos, ambos com experiência significativa em matéria de investigação e curadoria em exposições de design, concordaram em participar numa mesa redonda moderada por Francisco Providência, designer com experiência museográfica e investigador do ID+ Instituto de Investigação em Design, Media e Cultura, para discutir o tema da Musealização do Design, que tem vindo a atrair um interesse público crescente. Dada a impossibilidade de estar presente, Bárbara Coutinho foi representada por um texto de reflexão sobre o tema, iniciando a sessão com a apresentação comentada de vários projetos de investigação e exposição de José Bártolo. Na sessão de encerramento do congresso, os convidados convergiram para um modelo crítico que, partindo de coleções materiais, exprime uma intenção maioritariamente de projeção política e social, segundo Bárbara, enquanto maioritariamente histórica e social, para Bártolo.*

**Palavras-chave:** *museologia; museografia; design; Casa do Design; MUDE.*

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\* Communication designer (graduated in 1985, with its own studio since then), author of several awarded exhibitions and museums, among which are the Museu do Dinheiro do Banco de Portugal and the Museu Municipal de Penafiel. Co-founder member of ID+ Instituto de Investigação em Design, Media e Cultura and Design professor at University of Aveiro, where he manages, with Joana Quental, the Doctoral Programme in Design. Representing Portugal, he is an advisory member of the Bienal Iberoamericana de Design and member of the scientific commission of Porto Design Biennale. Email: fprovidencia@ua.pt.

## PARTICIPANTS

José Bártolo, having dedicated his work to research in Design and Art, is also Scientific Director of *esad*—*idea*, member of Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Linguagem da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, editor of the magazine «Pli Arte & Design», author of several articles and books related to history and critics of design, having lectured at the doctorate programme at Faculdade de Arquitectura (University of Porto) and at ESAD. Curator of many national and international Design exhibitions, he directs the agenda of Casa do Design, in Matosinhos, and is the Chief Curator of Porto Design Biennale.

Bárbara Coutinho, doctoral student in museology investigating the «Espaço expositivo nos museus do séc. XXI», is the founding director and programmer of Mude – Museu do Design e da Moda, Francisco Capelo Collection (since 2006). Professor at Instituto Superior Técnico (University of Lisbon), where she teaches Art Theory and History, she devotes her time to research, curatorship, teaching, editing and writing. Member of Docomomo International. Between 1998 and 2006 she conceived and directed the Educational Department and the programme of Art, Design and Architecture courses at the Exhibition Centre of Centro Cultural de Belém Foundation.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to overcome the inability to be physically present, Bárbara Coutinho<sup>1</sup> was represented by her text, previously shared, reflecting on Design Museums (still recent in the history of museography), questioning their role and contribution to the history, practice, critics and teaching of Design, revealing the way Design has been perceived over time and its influences on society and mentalities. In that sense, the author acknowledges to the museum and the exhibitions a sociocultural political and ideological role, beyond the conservative, artistic or curatorial dimension.

For these reasons, Bárbara Coutinho questions herself about the need of rethinking the place and role of the museum:

How can the Design Museum contribute to a reflection on the material culture?

Which social pact should it promote, which relationship with things should it support, and which relevance should be assigned to them?

Will the awareness of everyone to the real importance of design allow to transform society? Guaranteeing sustainability to its development?

Will the museum promote the sharing of information and intergenerational knowledge?

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the physical absence of Bárbara Coutinho, for reasons of force majeure, we present a brief framework of her positions based on a statement written and sent by the author.

Will the museum occupy the place of interpretation and experience to the transformation and social and human knowledge?

Moving apart from entertainment, may it provide the approach between aesthetics and politics? Approaching creativity to life?

And which may be the consequences of these reconfigurations into the internal functioning own order of museums and their teams?

MUDE's proposal is to reflect through its museum practice, reaffirming in its own brand the imperative for change. MUDE, aiming to contribute «to the cultural, cognitive and emotional development of each individual, in a perspective of an active citizenship education, in order to change the attitude facing material culture and life itself», overcomes, by the desire of social activation, the practice of museological preservation.

It is, therefore, in MUDE, a clear purpose of politicisation of Design and of social politicisation through Design, so that its exhibition becomes ethical, that is to say, an objective programme that will functionally superimpose itself to the own culture of Design, allocating it to the critical exercise.

Politicised museum, indeed, once all the museums, as social institutions for the accreditation of cultural and artistic value, constitute a political intentionality; but also political as an ideological vehicle to social revolution.

José Bártolo starts by presenting a communication<sup>2</sup> where he also reflects on the museology of Design, to which he recognises a projectual relevance, beyond its curatorial role. In line with Bárbara Coutinho, José Bártolo advocates for the right and duty of disciplinary discursification of Design (Portuguese), under the double condition of curatorship while conceiving as the *Exhibition of Design* as sometimes *orienting the exhibiting Design*. Observing the History of Design exhibitions in Portugal, between the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he will conclude with the presentation of the strategy of Casa do Design programming which he is responsible for in Matosinhos.

If Bárbara Coutinho anchors her communication on the inquiring role of the museum, as a platform from which audiences might question the world, José Bártolo also states that but reveals a more historical accuracy, leaning on his practice as a researcher of Design History, collector and gatherer of documentation, supported by the archaeology of studies that he develops based on his own collections, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> *Exposições de Design e Design expositivo: a curadoria como discursificação disciplinar do design português* by José Bártolo. The communication focuses its attention on the Design exhibitions developed in Portugal between 1960 and nowadays to analyse, from this *corpus* on, the importance of exhibitions as a space for project in Design and to reflect about the relevance of the curatorial dimension to the subject consolidation of Portuguese Design from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The communication ends with a more specific framework of the programming strategy of Casa do Design de Matosinhos.

by the research about designers that are authors of several exhibitivie manifestations of Design and its intentions.

Bártolo, using documental examples to support his research, discloses a genuine interest in objects, in their materiality and conservation, in production techniques, in authors, in the fights they contain and reveal, in the stories associated with their accomplishment and, naturally, in the contribution given while agents of the history of the subject, the culture and the country.

More conservative than speculator, Bártolo reserves the judgement of his curatorial conclusions to the interpretation of the collected, studied and exhibited pieces, though seeming to assume a scientific performance as a Design historian.

## DESIGN MUSEOLOGY

Museology, in its very long social mission, reveals a self-history on conservation, exhibition, contextualisation, transference and production of ideas through objects, alternative to other structures of teaching and learning. The technical solutions for its implementation, declined from the interpretation of a body of functional intentions, from the set of material constraints, constructive opportunities and technological availabilities, also characterise in the morphology, symbolic intentions that result from the endogenous interpretation of the museum, of its (philosophical) intent — «The form is a content of truth of masterpieces»<sup>3</sup>.

Design, a subject instituted from the creative practice of drawing, has a body of knowledge, history and culture of its own, distinguished by the practice of cultural mediation between organisations and individuals, technologies and performances, individuals and their own bodies, aiming the transformation of preserved data into information of audiences and the information of audiences into productive knowledge applied to their own existences. By recognising Design as *a subject of mediation*, the Design Museum will be a tautology (a mediation of a mediation), if not a metamediation. Assuming its endeavour of *metamediation*, the Design Museum cannot renounce to the ideological responsibility for its form, but taking innovation as a goal, it should focus on the competence to *question in a better way*, in a mediation for the doubt that will oppose it to the performance of a myth making machine.

Although recognised by the contributions on the functionalist drawing of products (since the industrial revolution), Design presents itself more and more socially present, by the contribution to the communication of appropriate contents, transferred by its own shape. The communication dimension of Design not only applies to its condition of vehicle, but also to the shape while information in itself — though Design seems

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<sup>3</sup> ADORNO, 1981.

nowadays to withdraw itself from its industrial and communication past to state itself through services, in a more social, political and activist way.

In a conference lectured at Galeria Paulo Figueiredo and transcribed by Gabriel Borba, Vilém Flusser<sup>4</sup> attempts to explain Art (and therefore all the artefacts) from the phenomena of *reprocessing and transference* of information — these two «problems characterise all the production and, with specific features, also the production called “art”»<sup>5</sup>. The processing from which new information results is known as «creativity»; the expression-impression from which the «work of art» results is known as «productivity». Therefore, the problem of the museology of Design should focus on creativity and productivity, on the contribution to human innovation and on its material communication. But looking towards Design singularity, diverse, as a subject, from other close areas such as art, engineering and management, we cannot help considering an ontology based on dimensions such as authorship, construction and programme, that is to say, on the author (designer), the constructor (maker) and the user (user), categories that the Design Museum, in London, adopted for the structure of its permanent exhibition, in Kensington.

But will the ontological foundation constitute a Design epistemology that its museography should observe?

By relating Museology to Design we will start to find the demonstrations of museography in a prodigious history of forms that will be, in themselves, expressions of knowledge, that Derrick de Kerckhove<sup>6</sup> presents under the diachronic vision of the history of museology, shaped by three archetypes: the *showcase museum* (in the historical and documental tradition of conservation of distinguished objects), the *ideological museum* (with the appearance of the curator, using collections for the construction of speeches) and the *accelerator museum* (digital, experiential and interactive, able to provide answers to the visitor in a useful time to apply them to his own life)<sup>7</sup>. In that sense, the designer, while drawer of the museum mediation, will be implicitly a curator, once he conditions the exhibited contents with the exhibiting shape.

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<sup>4</sup> FLUSSER, Vilém (1981). *Como explicar a arte*. Lecture that took place at Galeria Paulo Figueiredo and transcribed by Gabriel Borba. [Consult. 27 Dec. 2012]. Available at <<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-explicar-a-producao.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> FLUSSER, Vilém (1981). *Como explicar a arte*. Lecture that took place at Galeria Paulo Figueiredo and transcribed by Gabriel Borba. [Consult. 27 Dec. 2012]. Available at <<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-explicar-a-producao.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> KERCKHOVE, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> KERCKHOVE, 1998:175-187.

## DESIGN MUSEOGRAPHY

In museography, the way objects present themselves (museographic rhetoric) will participate in the construction of what they represent and, therefore, a Museum of Design will be also a modeller of Design.

The project Cides.pt<sup>8</sup>, Centro de Interpretação do Design Português, besides aiming to stop the forgetfulness and anonymity of Portuguese Design, intended to «develop and evaluate new approaches to museology and museography of Design», restoring symbolic and creative value to Portuguese artefacts, through their «inverted engineering» and with the multidisciplinary support from Museology, History, Interaction, Philosophy and Aesthetics.

Considering the museological investigation by Inês Ferreira<sup>9</sup>, centred on the mediation through and of creativity (proposing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the *creative service*, likewise the educational service in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the museum (and the Museum of Design) should offer, nowadays, the support service to the expressive production of its visitor, allowing him to evolve from consumer to producer or from receiver to issuer. But will the visitor be able to go beyond the alienating manipulation of playful, immersive, technically mediated experience to incorporate it as knowledge, as an increase to his critical skill?

The museology of Design will imply a historical, social and cultural perspective on Design. Several examples have been arising in that direction, disseminated by exhibitions and museums that privilege the exhibition of the artefact under its morphological, stylistic and historical (contextualising the evolution of shapes), social (evaluating its functional impact on life and accessibility of people), technological (proposing new means of energy and production to sustainability) and cultural (testifying copyright and ideological purposes gathered into the production of new meanings) dimensions.

The Design Museum will constitute an instrument of transference and production of knowledge, but epistemologically hostage of its own nature of *cultural mediator*. What subsists to the explosion of forms and new domains of contemporary Design is the common denominator of (cultural) mediator and, therefore, of an operational connector, of a translator. But, in the impossibility of its neutrality, its amorphous condition, the mediation has form and, therefore, intrinsic or aesthetical value.

One of the main contradictions of the museography of Design is that, in contrast to art, Design implies a practical knowledge, a usage, an experimentation that the

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<sup>8</sup> CIDES.PT, Centro de Interpretação do Design Português, ref.: PTDC/CPC-DES/4754/2012, project type I&DT, financed by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (national level), applied by ID+ (Universities of Aveiro and Porto), beginning on 1 Jun. 2013 and concluded on 31 Oct. 2015. [Consult. Sep. 2019]. Available at <[https://sigarra.up.pt/flup/pt/projectos\\_geral.mostra\\_projecto?p\\_id=65741](https://sigarra.up.pt/flup/pt/projectos_geral.mostra_projecto?p_id=65741)>.

<sup>9</sup> FERREIRA, 2016.



museum, in the name of preserving the object, cannot tolerate. But in the several usages assumed by Design, we acknowledge both as practical as symbolic functions, that will imply the coexistence with objects, providing the production of innumerable layers of meaning.

Hypothetically the best *design museum* would be constituted by the projection of information on the objects with which we coexist in daily life, attributing to them layers of meaning, from their author, their manufacturer, other users and thinkers, recreating at each moment a landscape of knowledge and collective meaning. The museum shall be the place of privileged observation over the phenomenon of Design, questioning it so that, by losing opacity, it becomes comprehensible as far as possible, thus fulfilling its role of knowledge producer.

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**PART III**  
ROUND TABLE



# CAN AN EXHIBITION REHEARSE A MUSEUM? NOTES ON DESIGN EXHIBITIONS AND EXHIBITION DESIGN IN THE PORTUGUESE TWENTIETH CENTURY

JOSÉ BÁRTOLO\*

**Abstract:** *Focusing on several exhibitions of Portuguese design presented to the public throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this article reflects on the relationships between exhibitions, archives and museums. Considering the concept of para-museological practice, on the one hand, and a canon of a normative museological discourse, on the other hand, the article seeks to analyse different relationships between design exhibitions and the musealization of design objects in the Portuguese context.*

**Keywords:** *design exhibitions; Portuguese design; archive; para-museum.*

**Resumo:** *Centrando a sua atenção em diversas exposições de design português organizadas e apresentadas publicamente ao longo do século XX, este artigo reflete sobre possíveis relações entre exposições, arquivos (públicos ou privados) e museus. Considerando, por um lado, o conceito de prática paramuseológica e, por outro lado, partindo de elementos caracterizadores de discursos museológicos normativos, o artigo procura analisar diferentes relações entre exposições de design e formas de musealização dos objetos de design no contexto da segunda metade do século XX português.*

**Palavras-chave:** *exposições de design; design português; arquivo; paramuseum.*

This article sets off with a question enunciated in its title, in such manner it reveals its interest in introducing a reflection focused on the analysis of exhibitions by thinking of them as a medium identifiable with the notion of para-museum<sup>1</sup>.

Nora Sternfeld suggests that we look at the para-museum as a tangential device to the institutionalised museum, something which is simultaneously inside and outside. In such way, the para-museum might establish a parasitic relationship with the museum or operate as a subversive gesture that appropriates it — materially or semantically.

These force and value relations between the para-museum and the museum are not one-sided. Museums also interfere on the para-museum practices by intervening on or institutionalising them. A relevant example of this is when temporary exhibition's contents are integrated into a museum's collection and, consequently, museumised.

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\* ESAD – Escola Superior de Artes e Design. Esad—idea, investigação em Design e Arte. FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.

<sup>1</sup> STERNFELD, 2017.

This text invites the reader to look at an exhibition as a device capable of operating within different media — downstream and upstream of the exhibition itself, such as: the poster which communicates the exhibition; the catalogue which preserves its memory and expands its interpretive base; and/or the public programming which often comes along with it.

Even though the focus today lies on design exhibitions, the references presented below will go beyond the design discipline to fields such as visual arts or architecture, to name a few, yet to fields where design projects were either exhibited or present as editorial.

The reading of Mary Anne Staniszewski's work *The Power of Display* analyses the understanding of exhibition design both as an aesthetic medium and as a historical category, one of the most neglected dimensions in cultural history. Since the 1980s, the author acknowledges a growing interest in the study of exhibitions, however she also recognises that how artefacts «are seen and displayed remains a relatively overlooked consideration»<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly in our national context, exhibitions, even in a broader disciplinary spectrum (art, design and architecture), are object of limited formal research. However, in recent years some relevant work has emerged in the academic context such as: Ana Neiva's doctoral thesis *Exhibiting Portuguese Architecture. Twentieth-Century Curatorial Strategies* published in 2020; and the comprehensive analysis<sup>3</sup> focus on *Núcleos de Arte e Arquitetura Industrial and Design Industrial* of Instituto Nacional de Investigação Industrial, who were responsible for holding the *1<sup>st</sup> Exhibition of Portuguese Design* and *2<sup>nd</sup> Exhibition of Portuguese Design* in the early 1970s; and the succeeding pioneer studies of Helena Souto<sup>4</sup> on Universal Exhibitions (1851-1900) and Margarida Acciaiuoli's<sup>5</sup> study on the Estado Novo's exhibitions in the period between 1934 and 1940. Yet, the research gap remains in regard to the development of a survey of all exhibitions made, the reflection on discourses and curatorial practices, and the comprehensive analysis of their cultural, political, economic impacts. This lesser attention given to exhibitions, their strategic importance and cultural reverberation is even more significant when it clearly contrasts with the number of exhibitions developed, their programmatic ambition and, in some cases, the influential ballast they generated in various planes of the Portuguese reality.

In some aspects, yet seeking not to create overlaps, this article will continue the survey and exhibition's analysis initiated in two previous studies<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> STANISZEWSKI, 1998: 21.

<sup>3</sup> COUTINHO, SOUTO, *coord.*, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> SOUTO, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> ACCIAIUOLI, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> BÁRTOLO, 2016: 54-73; BÁRTOLO, 2014: 51-66.

Within the broad time frame of the Portuguese twentieth century, this text proposes a differentiation between two types of exhibitions: *regime or regimental exhibitions* and *independent exhibitions*.

The regimental exhibitions present themselves, particularly inseparable from the Estado Novo regime, although not exclusively. They were usually promoted as part of a more extensive programme and worked as a regime's propaganda device, in which a particular staging of power, nationality, and values were constructed. This event's typology had its paradigmatic conception in *Exposição do Mundo Português* (1940). Yet its aesthetic and ideological characterisation began earlier with *Exposição Portuguesa* in Sevilha (1929), already under the influence of António de Oliveira de Salazar, it goes on in the *1.ª Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (1934), *Exposição Internacional de Bruxelas* (1937), *New York World's Fair* (1939), and it culminates with the remarkable installation project by Pedro Cid in the *Exposição de Bruxelas* (1958), and then expanding to 1970 with its participation in the *Expo '70*, Osaka, Japan.

The independent exhibitions, on the other hand, are not totally circumscribed to a political programme and it is possible to recognise a significant set of them in which three typologies can be identified:

1) *individual exhibitions* which enable reflections on authorship's appraisal in Portuguese design before 1974. To name a few, António Soares, Bernardo Marques, Paulo Ferreira, Jorge Barradas presented their work in individual and collective exhibitions. It is worth mentioning the existence of an exhibition and design objects sale's space named Galeria UP because it precedes the opening of identical spaces in Lisbon such as Casa Quintão or Casa Aguiar from 1930s onwards.

2) *archive exhibitions* which, unlike regular exhibitions and for programmatic reasons, intended to be ephemeral. This exhibition's type arrived evidently late in Portugal, and it focused on developing research, archiving, and musealization of design artefacts. Already in a democratic context, the exhibition *300 Anos do Cartaz em Portugal* (National Library of Lisbon, 1975-1976) stands out for its importance and significance. This documentary exhibition was promoted by the Secretaria de Estado da Cultura (Secretary of State for Culture) in collaboration with the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa BNL (National Library of Lisbon) and was based on a remarkable set of edicts, flyers and protoposters from the BNL's archives, between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless before this event, it became apparent the rarity of posters from the subsequent period, so the exhibition was developed with the implication of research efforts, acquisition and offers, which resulted on an archive of around 200 posters, reaching the beginning of the 1970s. As relevant examples, the SNI (National Secretariat of Information) posters were borrowed from

the Museu da Comunicação Social, as well as donations were received from the National Lithography and Bulhão Printing Works. Thus, it enabled the constitution of a significant, treated and organised collection.

3) *corporate exhibitions* which here the term «corporate» intends to refer to the coordinated efforts to institutionalise Portuguese design beyond a regime's programme or authorship's affirmation. These exhibitions represent collective initiatives of a national design assertion, associated with concerns on how to communicate it, reflect on it and promote it commercially. The first corporate exhibition with a modern awareness of design was perhaps the 1.º *Salão Nacional de Artes Decorativas* (Palácio Foz, Lisboa, May-June 1949). Although it presented itself as «a simple trial, a simple rehearsal for a future exhibition», it attempted nevertheless to affirm design's importance, especially in the attempt of bringing design and industry closer together: «we are aware that, in many cases, the industry professionals have not yet felt the interest in using decorative artists to improve their production, and on the other hand, artists have not yet discovered — due to the lack of this collaboration — the immense possibilities open to their practice»<sup>7</sup>.

42 years were necessary for this rehearsed exhibition to take place again, then named 1.ª *Exposição de Design Português* organised by INII Instituto Nacional de Investigação Industrial and by INTERFORMA Equipamento de Interiores, Lda., sponsored by the Fundo de Fomento de Exportação and Associação Industrial Portuguesa, which opened in Lisbon, at FIL, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1971. This exhibition, along with the necessity of collaboration between design and industry pursued by 1949' *Salão*, brought the ambition of internationalising Portuguese design: «the ever-growing need to export and to qualitatively increase the value of exported products, as well as the greater intensity of international relations and communication, are certainly two of the most determining causes of stimulus for Portuguese creators and *designers*»<sup>8</sup>.

Amongst the *corporate exhibitions*, whose development was intensified with the creation of Núcleo de Arte e Arquitectura of the INII in 1960 and which had successfully produced the 1.ª *Quinzena de Estética Industrial* (1965), appear the 2.ª *Exposição de Design Português* (1973) and the exhibition *Design e Circunstância* organised by Associação Portuguesa de Designers in 1982. These exhibitions are also particularly interesting because they assert themselves as efforts to inscribe Portuguese design historically and to build upon what is called a *discursive construction* of design as an autonomous disciplinary field.

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<sup>7</sup> AA.VV., 1949: 12.

<sup>8</sup> AA.VV., 1971: 7.



## BEFORE THE FIRST PORTUGUESE DESIGN EXHIBITIONS

In 1935 the architect Paulino Montez published his work *As Belas-Artes nas Festas Publicas em Portugal*<sup>9</sup>, although Montez does not primarily focus on exhibition design and considers broadly «the constructions and decorations that are executed for the effect of some festival», the author reflects on the dimension of display as «the pavilions, the platforms and ornaments that in general usually appear, always show the same shapes and paintings, with their inexpressive and decadent aspects»<sup>10</sup>.

The ephemeral architecture and installation projects developed by Paulino Montez himself for the *Exposição das Caldas da Rainha* (1927) appear as modernisation's examples of exhibition languages alongside the work of Silva Porto and Columbano Bordallo Pinheiro.

Furthermore, a focus on exhibitions can be found in no. 9 of the «Revista Oficial do Sindicato dos Arquitectos» (Official Magazine of the Architects' Union) from April/June 1939, which is precisely dedicated to this theme. This magazine, directed by Cottinelli Telmo, analyses projects such as: the *Exposição Histórica da Ocupação* (1937) designed by Artur Fonseca and Fred Kradolfer; the *Exposição-Feira de Luanda* (1938) designed by Vasco Palmeiro; the Portuguese Pavilion at *Exposição de Nova Iorque* (1939) designed by Jorge Segurado; and the various pavilions conceived for the 1940 *Portuguese World Historical Exhibition*.

Although an absolute stable glossary cannot be found, in these exhibition's initiatives promoted by the State, it is clear that in most cases the designation of *Commissioner* is used for those who have the responsibility of coordinating the project, who also politically answer to those who promote it, and the *Decorator* designation is used for those who deal with the installation project and graphic design. However, there are exceptions.

In the catalogue *Secção Colonial da Exposição do Mundo Português* by José Salvação Barreto appears the term «Chefe de Curadoria», in a direct translation of the Anglo-Saxon term «Chief Curator» which refers to an employee with administrative oversight functions rather than someone with an artistic task.

Generally, until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the person who takes responsibility for the exhibition's conception and coordinate the other artists involved tended to be called the *Commissioner*, with a semantic value identical to the French term «commissaire», which represented a French-speaking affiliation of Portuguese culture; in turn, the term *Conservator(a)* was used to identify the responsibility for a museum collection.

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<sup>9</sup> MONTEZ, 1935.

<sup>10</sup> MONTEZ, 1935: 51.

In order to identify a time frame, we can recognise that after Portugal joined the EEC in 1986 and the gradual influence of Anglo-Saxon culture, the term *Curador* (curator) began to appear with more remarkable recurrence.

## THE FIRST EXHIBITIONS OF PORTUGUESE DESIGN

«What is shown in the *1.º Salão de Artes Decorativas* (itself a simple attempt, a simple rehearsal for a future Exhibition) has no pretensions to be more than the basis of the work to be done, an indispensable starting point to make the endeavors' route safe»<sup>11</sup> and together with the author's point raised on the lack of collaboration between the industry and design (and consequent missed possibilities). Those were the bases presented in the text written by the exhibition's General Secretary Júlio Coyolla, as the expressed intentions of this exhibition organised by SNI – Secretariado Nacional da Informação, Cultura Popular e Turismo, in Palácio Foz, between May and June 1949.

Other aims of the event were «the desire to highlight the achievements made: more frequent call to specialised artists (abandoning consequently “amateur” solutions, always flawed even though well-intentioned); better use of certain materials, until recently despised or unknown; the revival of certain traditions, which were given modern expression (such as filigree and single-figure tiles)»<sup>12</sup>.

This exhibition was curated by Tom, possibly at the time the most commercially oriented Portuguese designer, and Manoel Lapa and Jorge Mattos Chaves, who also took care of the exhibition design. The exhibition's set-up was oversaw by Ruy Brito (carpentry), António Ferreira (painting), Duarte e Serra (electricity), and Sampaio e Laginha (stucco). Additionally, Mundet & C<sup>a</sup>'s cork coverings, Mosaicultura's ornamental plants and the general painting awarded to the company Belmur – Atlantic for which the designer Fred Kradolfer worked, among others renowned designers.

A catalogue was published for this exhibition with the cover's illustration by Alberto Cardoso, photography by Mário and Horácio Novais and the graphic production by Bertrand & Irmãos, Lda., one of the event's sponsor companies.

And some of the works presented were later integrated into the Museum of Decorative Arts' collection, inaugurated in 1953, even though this museum's primary collection originated from Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva's collection.

Later in 1959, Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian decided to bequeath his assets to Portugal in the form of a foundation, which would immediately become a kind of autonomous state within the Portuguese state — a territory supporting the arts, culture, and scientific research, significantly extending the national borders beyond the bodies of the Estado Novo.

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<sup>11</sup> AA.VV., 1949: 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> AA.VV., 1949: 2-3.

The Calouste Gulbenkian's Foundation plays a vital role in the sociocultural characterisation of this period. If *I Exposição de Artes Plásticas* promoted by the foundation still highlighted essentially the graphic artists whom Estado Novo's regime had consecrated, as well as their magazine «Colóquio» (1959) seemed to maintain in format, editing and graphic directions (by Bernardo Marques) a clear heritage from «Panorama» magazine, also associated with the regime, from the beginning of 1963 onwards (the year in which the Foundation began its 'scholarships abroad' programme in the design field), the Foundation's programme of activities and editions profoundly distinguished itself from the Estado Novo's cultural programming.

Only in 1971, 22 years after the actual first Portuguese design exhibition rehearsed in *Salão Nacional de Artes Decorativas* (1949), the second one happened entitled *1.ª Exposição de Design Português* held in 1971<sup>13</sup>.

Yet it is of great relevancy to mention that even before the *1.ª Exposição de Design Português*, in 1965 the *1.ª Exposição de Artes Gráficas* held at the SNBA (the National Society of Fine Arts) constitutes a pivotal moment to consolidate a critical discourse on design (evidence shown in the text by Sena da Silva, published in the exhibition catalogue). Though, as well as it would be the case of *Quinzena de Estética Industrial* (Palácio Foz, 1965), organised by the INII, and the *Bienal Luso-Espanhola*, organised by the Portuguese Publicists' Club, which took place between November and December 1968 in Lisbon, none of these para-museological initiatives gave origin to new museums or nuclei within existing museums.

Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding the exhibitions: *Design & Circunstância* (1982) and the exhibition dedicated to Portuguese graphic design presented at the *VI Bienal Internacional de Arte de V. N. de Cerveira* (1988). Both of these events coincide within a time period when: Portuguese design was being institutionalised, mainly through the creation of the Centro Nacional de Design (1985), later to become the Centro Português de Design; and when an intense partnership between ICEP and CPD towards the promotion and dynamization of Portuguese design was happening, also politically supported, and focusing on three fundamental axes — industry, internationalisation, and the creation of new public and consumers (eventually then becoming a distinguish imprint of the 1990s). So, exhibitions became not only the unique, as well as the primary mean of achieving this strategy. Approaching schools and other ongoing initiatives, particularly the *Jovem Designer* competition, aimed to feed and renew the exhibitions' content and authors.

This policy for design, undoubtedly unique in our contemporary history, sought to take advantage of community funds and the possibilities offered by significant events which marked the 90s such as: *Europália* (91), *Lisboa Capital Europeia da*

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<sup>13</sup> For further contextualisation, see COUTINHO, SOUTO, *coord.*, 2017.

*Cultura* (94), and *Expo'98*. Under this framework, both in Portugal and abroad, Portuguese design exhibitions multiplied: *Design para a Cidade* (1991), *Exposição de Design Português* (Tokyo, 1993), *Os Caminhos do Design* (itinerant exhibition passing through 22 cities, 1993), or among others, *A Road Show – Portuguese Products* (Frankfurt and Tokyo, 1996).

## THE DESIGN EXHIBITIONS BETWEEN 1992 AND 1998

The exhibitions *Manufacturas – Création Portugaise Contemporaine* and *Diseño Portugués*, part of the exhibition *Lusitânia – Cultura Portuguesa Actual*, took place in 1991 and 1992 respectively, with identical protagonists, the curator Delfim Sardo and exhibition design by Pedro Silva Dias and both events responded to an identical programme. *Manufacturas* had been developed to be presented in Brussels, within the scope of *Europalia 91 – Portugal* (later itinerating to Cadeia da Relação do Porto), it brought together 32 designers from various areas (furniture, fashion, and jewellery) and the collaboration of 16 companies. Consecutively, *Diseño Portugués* was presented at the Madrid's *Círculo de Belas-Artes* and highlighted the design work done either by visual artists (Francisco Rocha's hybrids between sculpture and design), or by architects (Álvaro Siza, Pedro Ramalho, Souto de Moura), or even the work of a new generation of product and furniture designers such as Filipe Alarcão, Pedro Silva Dias, and Marco Sousa Santos.

These two exhibitions' curator Delfim Sardo reflected on them as revealing «substantial changes — and even lifestyle changes — in Portugal, which find their way into the tributary tendencies of a “return to the baroque” characteristic of contemporary culture. Specific to the presented set, and beyond the diversity of styles and trends, the same permeability to conceptual contexts that lie outside the strict domain of *design*, whether they be architecture, the visual arts, or purely of thought»<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to their function of promoting and internationalising design, these two exhibitions were taken on as a moment of self-reflection of Portuguese design and claimed a heritage close to that of the *1.ª Exposição* and *Design & Circunstância* as «standing points» on national design, its public, and its productive relationships. Delfim Sardo speaks of the exhibitions as a «map of tendencies [...] that oscillate between modernism (as creative ethics) and the post-modernism present in the neo-baroque which characterize the 1980s. Therefore, and above all, it was sought to find connections and confluence's axes in the creators' concerns and in their expressive forms»<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> SARDO, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> SARDO, 1992.

Until the end of the 1990s, several design exhibitions were being promoted: from remarkable exhibitions such as *Design para a Cidade* (organised by CPD, 1991), which took place in the Serralves Gardens and displayed objects and equipment that imprinted the urban landscape (from GALP's fuel pumps to STCP's bus stops), to itinerant exhibitions which focused on international projection such as *Design Português Contemporâneo – Uma Antologia* (1997) presented in Frankfurt and Barcelona's *Primavera do Design*.

Within *Lisboa 94 – Capital Europeia da Cultura*'s programme, the *Design/Lisboa 94* exhibition was similarly ambitious, yet its critical reception revealed disappointment. In the *Anuário no. 21/22 (2000)* of Centro Português de Design (Portuguese Design Centre), Nuno Lacerda Lopes wrote that the exhibition, held in the recently inaugurated Centro Cultural de Belém, «allowed for a wide display of the different activities and concerns of Portuguese designers. From graphic design to furniture, from fashion to set design, the different conceptions and understandings of this disciplinary field were exhibited. It now appears to be quite rooted in the industry, leading some authors to consider it close to the commercial show and distant from the debate and theoretical reflection of the discipline».

This commercial tendency seemed to be reinforced by important initiatives: the creation of the Design Space by the Centro Português de Design and the Divisão de Feiras e Congressos da Associação Industrial Portuguesa, which allowed the organisation of the *Exposição de Design Português Contemporâneo* parallel to the fairs held at *Exponor*.

*Exposição de Design Português Contemporâneo* gathered four modules: Companies; Designers (exhibiting produced objects or prototypes); Invited Authors; and Schools (for the presentation of design projects developed in design schools).

Concurrently, the number of gallery stores dedicated to design was increasing, imposing new forms of independent curatorship and publishing of new designers. Some examples are: Altamira, Dimensão, Loja da Atalaia, Paris Sete, Santos da Casa, No Tejo, Interna, Tom Tom Shop, Arquitectónica or Díade Galeria Arquitetura/Design (in Lisbon) and Sátira, Vantag, DDI, Intramuros, Galeria Minimal, Carvalho Baptista, Bastidor and Arte Casa (in Porto). These companies, also responsible for design's publishing, have developed relevant exhibitions autonomously or associated with public initiatives. One example is the exhibition *10 Autores Portugueses – Design Contemporâneo* promoted by DDI – *Difusão Internacional de Design do Porto*, supported by Secretaria de Estado da Cultura (Secretary of State for Culture), which highlighted the work of Álvaro Siza, Ângelo de Sousa, António Modesto, Daciano da Costa, Souto de Moura, Filipe Alarcão, José Mário Santos, Pedro Mendes, Pedro Ramalho and Pedro Silva Dias.

The Ministry of Culture, created with the socialist electoral victory, founded in 1995 the IAC – Instituto de Arte Contemporânea, which promotes the dissemination of visual arts, design and architecture abroad. In the design field, the Ministry of Culture is associated with the promotion of the first Design Biennial held in Portugal in 1999, *Experimentadesign*, organised by Associação Experimenta, created a year earlier.

Also through IAC, Francisco Capelo design's collection was able to be stored at the Centro Cultural de Belém (CCB), enabling in 1999 the creation of the Design Museum based firstly there and later transferred to Chiado district (downtown Lisbon), giving way to the current MUDE (Museu do Design e da Moda – Coleção Francisco Capelo). MUDE's initial collection consisted of 600 pieces of furniture, industrial, and fashion design almost entirely by international designers, such as Coco Chanel, Verner Panton, Droog Design, Philippe Starck, the Italian radical design and the work of Memphis.

Even if, in several cases, they have established *dialogues* or partnerships with museums, it is not yet perceptible within the Portuguese design exhibitions developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century situations where the exhibition *rehearses* the museum.

In the vastness of its production — from industrial design to furniture, from graphic design to ceramics and glass design, from fashion design to footwear design — Portuguese design objects are nevertheless dispersed among several museums, posing a *musealization's problem*, and/or oftentimes confined to private collections<sup>16</sup>.

However, the various Portuguese design exhibitions held throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly in the last three decades of that century, contributed to the exploration of diverse curatorial proposals, different exhibition design solutions, plural visions of design, expanding to para-museological practices and placing them in critical confrontation with, in Peter van Mensch's expression, *the normative museological discourse*.

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# UNPACKING MY COLLECTION

NUNO COELHO\*

**Abstract:** *Due to their ephemeral and disposable nature, product packaging and labels have never been the subject of exhaustive and continued safeguarding work throughout the twentieth century and rarely have been the focus of dedicated attention. However, these apparently neutral artefacts of material culture serve economic and political interests by conveying visual messages of cultural, emotional and psychological nature. By being ubiquitous, they reflect historical processes of ideas with implications for the formation and normalisation of certain ideological discourses. Therefore, the study of the impact of commercial imagery on society should not be neglected. This text documents several projects developed from the author's collection of product packaging and labels in which ways of transferring it into the public domain were tested, offering a possible contribution to the question «What are the existing private collections of graphic design in Portugal and what is their possible public contribution to the history of Portuguese design<sup>1</sup>?»*

**Keywords:** *graphic design history; material culture; packaging and labelling; private collection; research-production.*

**Resumo:** *Devido à sua natureza efémera e descartável, as embalagens e os rótulos de produtos de consumo nunca foram objeto de um trabalho exaustivo e contínuo de salvaguarda ao longo do século XX e, raramente, foram foco de atenção dedicada. No entanto, estes artefactos, aparentemente neutros, da cultura material servem interesses económicos e políticos ao transmitirem mensagens visuais de natureza cultural, emocional e psicológica. Por serem ubíquos, refletem processos históricos de ideias com implicações na formação e na normalização de certos discursos ideológicos. Portanto, o estudo do impacto da imagem comercial na sociedade não deve ser negligenciado. Este texto documenta vários projetos desenvolvidos a partir da coleção de embalagens e rótulos de produtos de consumo, do autor, em que foram testadas formas de a transferir para o domínio público, oferecendo um possível contributo para a pergunta: «Quais são as coleções particulares de design gráfico existentes em Portugal e qual o seu possível contributo público para a história do design português<sup>1</sup>?»*

**Palavras-chave:** *história do design gráfico; cultura material; embalagem e rotulagem; coleção privada; investigação-produção.*

## UNPACKING THIS TEXT (OR INTRODUCTION)

As artefacts of material culture, due to their ephemeral and disposable nature, product packaging and labels have never been the subject of exhaustive and continued safeguarding work throughout the twentieth century and have therefore rarely been the focus of exclusive and dedicated attention. Given the vastness of the material universe

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<sup>1</sup> SILVA, 2017: 16.

around us, the existing literature on the specific case of packaging and labelling over this period in Portugal is still limited and characterised by small samples included in catalogues of collections whose scientific value is of little significance.

My interest in this material graphic universe is linked to the fact that packaging and product labels, apparently neutral and innocuous elements, serve (and have always served) economic and political interests by conveying messages of a cultural, emotional and psychological nature. Due to their ubiquity, inserting themselves into the private sphere of consumers — their own homes — product packaging and labels carry visual messages that reflect historical processes of ideas and of discourse<sup>2</sup>. Due to their visual nature, often bold and telegraphic, images are easily absorbed by the public, with implications for the formation and normalisation of certain political and ideological discourse<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, design is naturally seen as a cultural product since «as social practices generate images, images generate social practices»<sup>4</sup>. Products, and so the images and the choice of brand names associated with them, seek to respond to the needs and desires of consumers (that are dictated by capitalist logics), who, in turn, see themselves reflected or represented in this particular visual graphic universe.



**Fig. 1.**

Viarco colouring pencils featuring a boy wearing a Mocidade Portuguesa uniform  
Source: Nuno Coelho

<sup>2</sup> VOS, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> PIETERSE, 1992: 10.

<sup>4</sup> CIARLO, 2011: 3.

As design objects, packaging and product labels are components that are often neglected compared to other artefacts of material and visual culture, such as postage stamps, paper currency or posters. Examples of packaging and labels included in publicly accessible collections are nearly non-existent, as it is still rare for the national industrial fabric to have a culture to preserve its memory through the constitution of its own museums. When they exist, these museums are rarely assembled through the formulation of scientific discourse, resembling more an accumulation of objects arranged in showcases.

However, this context has not prevented several studies from being developed in recent years. There has been greater academic interest in the subject and there are several private collectors in Portugal who, over the years, have gathered various artefacts related to Portugal's industrial past. Most of these collectors have a background in design, often focusing on a particular brand, or they may be simple enthusiasts with no personal or professional background in design. Rare exceptions aside, these collections do not guarantee access to an academic audience, thus making it impossible for knowledge to be produced from them, nor to a wider audience interested in historical issues, in particular by their not being lent to exhibitions or publications. It can be said that these initiatives are still sporadic, with little coordination among them and without great purpose to reach a wider audience, often enclosed in specialised scientific events.

From this perspective, the question «What are the existing private collections of graphic design in Portugal and what is their possible public contribution to the history of Portuguese design?», put forward by Sofia Rocha e Silva<sup>5</sup>, draws our attention to the need for systematic identification of these collections as a contribution to the history of design, making us question the implications of the transfer of a collection from the private sphere into the public domain.

Taking the opportunity to write this text as a contribution to this publication, as a result of my participation in the *Design Objects Conference*, I will document several practical projects developed from my collection of product packaging and labels. Therefore, ways of transferring a private collection into the public domain through the development of various cultural products carried out in different ways were tested. The description of each project is complemented by a brief description of contexts, purposes and methodologies applied. From the briefing of these projects, which I considered as case studies here, I will try to make a possible contribution to the question posed by Sofia Rocha e Silva.

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<sup>5</sup> SILVA, 2017: 16.

## A SHORT NOTE ABOUT THIS TEXT AND ITS TITLE

For this text, I decided to revisit sections of my PhD thesis titled *Packaging design in Portugal in the twentieth century* (abbreviated title)<sup>6</sup> and a text, also of my own, titled *An archaeology of design*<sup>7</sup>. The first document was concluded at the University of Coimbra and made public in 2013, while the second was published in the book *Sub 40 – Art and artists in Porto* published in 2015 as part of the homonymous exhibition curated by José Maia at the Porto Municipal Gallery. This text is therefore a revisited and edited version of both above-mentioned texts, complemented with the description of projects developed after 2015. The idea of revisiting these texts serves the dual purpose of updating existing ones with new information, since the most recent projects had not yet been reviewed, as well as inserting my research orientation into a broader context, since these texts are only available in Portuguese.

The title of this text is an appropriation of another titled *Unpacking my library: A speech on collecting* written in 1931 by Walter Benjamin<sup>8</sup> in which the author describes taking his approximately two thousand books out of various boxes, awaiting their placement onto bookshelves. In that particular moment, which summons chaos as well as order, books become objects with a second dimension — «immaterial, projected, historical, sentimental, evocative»<sup>9</sup>. If, in the author's understanding, a collection loses its meaning if it loses its personal nature (that of the collector), then I understand that a collection will necessarily undergo resignification processes when made publicly available. I was interested in exploring the concept of «unpacking» because the theme of this text is precisely «packaging». In turn, by using the singular first person throughout the text, rather than the majestic plural, I would like to reinforce my voice as a collector (as it was in this capacity that I participated in the *Design Objects Conference*), relegating my voice as an academic researcher to the background, while remaining determinant.

## PROTODESIGN REVALUATION CURRENTS

A possible definition of packaging is a container which contains or encloses a particular consumer product over its lifetime and is therefore used for its protection, transport, storage and handling. Packaging, in addition to its functional and economic dimensions, also operates at the level of its communicative dimension, contributing to social, cultural and psychological factors. In his book *The consumer society*, Baudrillard states that «the relation of the consumer to the object has consequently changed: the

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<sup>6</sup> COELHO, 2013a.

<sup>7</sup> COELHO, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> BENJAMIN, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> SILVA, 2017:17.

object is no longer referred to in relation to a specific utility, but as a collection of objects in their total meaning»<sup>10</sup>.

Consumer products are now valued not only for their use and functionality but, above all, for what they represent and symbolise, that is, a set of social and cultural codes transmitted visually by their packaging. The products are then evaluated by a dual system of factors — qualitative (functional) and quantitative (symbolic). The social relationship between individuals is, in many cases, mediated by objects since they are characterised by their communicative and symbolic dimension. This dimension is broadened by Debord's point that «the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images»<sup>11</sup>. Botton also reinforces this view by stating that the objects we own are the visible face of our social status — real or aspired — and that, therefore, they play a crucial role in giving that status<sup>12</sup>.

Literature has assumed that the genesis of graphic design as an autonomous discipline was largely a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which in Portugal only occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century would consolidate the autonomy of this discipline, not only as a result of this industrial progress, but also as a set of political, economic, social, cultural and artistic changes. The history of the twentieth century directly influenced the conception of the material universe conceived by the designers, which include everyday consumer products that are now identified through their packaging and labelling. The exponential increase in private consumption at this time led the industry to place special emphasis on the presentation of its products, not only for purposes of information but also for promoting trade and consumption. To this end, graphic design is now seen as essential in the fabric of business and industry.

As noted in the introduction to this text, product packaging and labelling has never been the subject of exhaustive and continued safeguarding work throughout the twentieth century due to its ephemeral and disposable nature. However, since the turn of the millennium, we have witnessed a paradigm shift in design that has translated into a growing appreciation of this material graphic universe in order to provide a contribution to the history of the field. I've called these processes «proto-design revaluation currents»<sup>13</sup>.

By protodesign I mean the conception of artefacts of material culture found at a time before the formalisation of the term design which, in Portugal, only occurred in the early 1970s<sup>14</sup>. Obviously, I understand that symbolism is an inherent condition to

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<sup>10</sup> BAUDRILLARD, 2007: 1.

<sup>11</sup> DEBORD, 2012:10.

<sup>12</sup> BOTTON, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> COELHO, 2013a: 305-379.

<sup>14</sup> FRAGOSO, 2012: 66, 127-128.

objects, regardless of the context (temporal, geographical, political, economic, among many others) in which they are produced. However, I understand that, through «proto-design revaluation currents», certain objects that are still present with the very same formal configuration (from the moment they were created) go through a process of «resymbolisation», that is, the product is no longer essentially functional in nature but essentially symbolic. This revaluation of the industrial material universe of past decades is characterised by bringing graphic packaging imagery back to life that was present in the daily lives of previous generations.

### **SOME EXAMPLES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL «EXCAVATIONS»**

It was in the context of the constitution of my product packaging and label collection that I developed a research orientation which I called «A design archaeology»<sup>15</sup>. The motivation for this orientation came from the need to deepen my empirically identified theme in 1997 and since then it has been formalised on several different occasions through the presentation of exhibitions, publications and commercial projects. Examples are the exhibitions *Undesign* (2003), *Viarco* (2006) and *Portuguese notebook* (2009) and two projects developed for the project *A Vida Portuguesa* (2004 and 2008). Subsequently, this subject was studied in depth in the context of my PhD research, with the *Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* being chosen as a case study (2013).

After the conclusion of this academic research, the project *Gorreana* (2015) and the exhibition and publication *5<sup>th</sup> notebook* (2017) were developed. *Confiança* has also been the focus of new revisits, resulting in the exhibitions *The face of Confiança* (2016) and *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* (2017), exhibitions that functioned as a diptych, as well as the publication of the book *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* launched during its namesake exhibition. I am currently developing a research on racist representations on packaging and labels produced in Portugal, from which the development of a cultural product is also expected.

#### **1. *Undesign* exhibition (2003)**

The *Undesign* exhibition took shape as my private collection of packaging from past decades was first publicly presented. I started this collection in 1997 and it was strongly inspired by one of the modules included in *Low budget: Everyday objects*, an exhibition by designers Matthias Dietz and Mats Theselius that took place at Centro Cultural de Belém in Lisbon in the same year<sup>16</sup>. My private collection was publicly presented for the first time in 2003 at Maus Hábitos gallery in Porto. The display device was relatively simple: the products were sorted into categories and placed on purpose-built shelves as if it were a shop window.

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<sup>15</sup> COELHO, 2013a: 329; COELHO, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> VILAR, *coord.*, 1997.



Fig. 2. *Undesign* exhibition (2003)

Source: Nuno Coelho

For its second presentation, in 2005, the collection/exhibition travelled to Germany where it was presented at the L71 Stadtgalerie gallery in Hannover. On this occasion, the exhibition occupied the shop window of a vacant shop located in the immediate vicinity of the gallery. The choice of this venue was deliberate in order to establish direct contact between the exhibition and the public space, enabling a distinct dialogue of its previous presentation by confronting the passers-by directly. Later the exhibition was presented four more times in Portugal, in Caldas da Rainha (2005), Lisbon (2006), Castelo Branco (2007) and Almada (2007).

## 2. *Viarco* exhibition (2006)

Based on the same objective of publicising industrial heritage via its products and following the same methodology applied in *Undesign*, I was invited to undertake an exhibition based on Viarco's graphic estate, the only pencil factory in Portugal<sup>17</sup> as part of the celebrations of the seventy years of its namesake brand. In the weeks leading up to the exhibition, various historical objects were collected at the company's facilities in São João da Madeira — packaging, labelling, graphic materials, original drawings and studies, prototypes, exhibitors, small production equipment, among other elements. These different objects were gathered in several window displays

<sup>17</sup> «VIARCO» [s.d.]. Available at <from <http://www.viarco.pt>>.



Fig. 3. Detail of Viarco exhibition (2006)

Source: Nuno Coelho

arranged in a single room, allowing dialogue between objects of different typologies. The exhibition, co-organised with Daniel Pires, artistic director of Maus Hábitos, was presented at the gallery in Porto in 2006.

### 3. Portuguese notebook exhibition (2009)

*Portuguese notebook* was the designation chosen for my participation in *Timeless: Less is Better*, an exhibition at Museu do Oriente, in Lisbon, as part of the EXD 2009 Biennial programme, organised by Experimenta Design<sup>18</sup>. The curators of the «Timeless Portugal» section, Rita João and Pedro Ferreira (from the Pedrita collective) and Frederico Duarte, chose the theme «Added values» and challenged seven national designers to reflect on the concepts of «quality», «longevity» and «Portugality». To this end, each participant would have to choose a product, service or message designed in Portugal in the twentieth century that would be synonymous with the three mentioned concepts, formulating a contemporary reinterpretation of the chosen «object» that should have the same typology or seek inspiration either in its material nature, function or associated patterns of use.

<sup>18</sup> *Timeless*, 2009.



In this exhibition, my proposal reflected on the notebooks of the producers Firmo, in Porto, and Emílio Braga, in Lisbon. A collection of notebooks from each of the producers was placed on a plinth, allowing visitors to handle the objects. One of the collections was placed on each side, while the two objects of reinterpretation were placed in the centre.

#### 4. «Vintage Confiança» and «Portugueses confiantes» product collections for A Vida Portuguesa (2004 and 2008)

Two projects were developed for the market in collaboration with the project A Vida Portuguesa (The Portuguese Life)<sup>19</sup> and Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory. In the first, original labels from past decades that were deposited in the warehouses of Confiança factory were used to produce soaps wrapped in labels that were decades old. We called this the «Vintage Confiança» soap collection (2004). In the second, we developed facsimile versions of a total of fifteen labels from the first half of the twentieth century, in collaboration with Nuno Zeferino, to create the «Portugueses confiantes» («Trustful Portuguese») collection (2008). With these two commercial projects, I intended to recover and to reactivate images and graphic motifs of the Portuguese industrial past, in an exercise of their maintenance in the present time.



Fig. 4.  
«Vintage Confiança» product collection for  
A Vida Portuguesa (2004)  
Source: A Vida Portuguesa

<sup>19</sup> «A VIDA PORTUGUESA» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.avidaportuguesa.com>>.



Fig. 5. «Portugueses confiantes» product collection for A Vida Portuguesa (2008)  
Source: A Vida Portuguesa

## 5. Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory installation (2013) and «Cento & vinte» product (2013)

My PhD thesis, titled *Packaging design in Portugal in the twentieth century, from the functional to the symbolic: the case study of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory*<sup>20</sup>, was the result of an academic research into this factory, founded in 1894 in Braga<sup>21</sup>. As a justification for the choice, I took into account its unique characteristics in the Portuguese industrial landscape, since Confiança packaging and labelling highlight the direct influence of the Portuguese political, social, economic, cultural and artistic history of the twentieth century in the graphic design of consumer products.

<sup>20</sup> COELHO, 2013a.

<sup>21</sup> «CONFIANÇA» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.confiancasoaps.com>>.

Complementing and articulating with my theoretical research and fieldwork, I decided to develop a design project component materialised in the «research-production» modality<sup>22</sup> in two distinct periods, which I called «observation» and «contamination», respectively; the first was characterised by the creation of an exhibition discourse and the second by the conception and development of a product. I understood this design project component as the result of a creative methodology, as it was constantly reformulated throughout the development of the research, it having been noticed that the information found did not always translate into what was expected to be found; and interventionist, viewing the designer as a producer of meaning and as a non-neutral subject. With this design project component, the main objective was to be able to contribute to the preservation of graphic memory and technical knowledge of the past as factors of industrial competitiveness.

With the «observation» exercise — which resulted in the creation of the installation *Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* — it was my intention to move away



Fig. 6. View of the *Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* installation (2013)  
Source: Nuno Coelho

<sup>22</sup> MOREIRA, ed., 2013.



Fig. 7. Detail of the *Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* installation (2013)

Source: Nuno Coelho

from taxonomic exhibition models, assuming a more exploratory and experimental character. I moved away from conventional or scientific exhibition models, namely those based on archival and documentary methodologies characteristic of industrial archaeology, in order to approach a more artistic and creative practice.

As a methodology for my research, given the fact that archives at Confiança were non-existent, I've created my own collection of packaging and labels related to this factory, with about one thousand distinct objects. As a display device, the installation consisted of two large plinths where the labels and packaging were arranged on their surface by colour, making up a chromatic gradient. It was possible to show a large part of the private archive of inventoried labels (around 660 different ones), in an attempt to show its size in terms of quantity of entries.

The collection was presented as a visual narrative of an aesthetic order, making it somewhat unreadable, since all the scientific keys to its understanding had been omitted. The constitution of the colour gradient on the surface of the volumes allowed the creation of an «object» with two possible readings: at a distance the visitor could perceive the colour graphic element (the chromatic gradient as an optical illusion); when closer the visitor could focus on the labels individually, being able to read their graphic elements (illustrations and typography).

At the same time, the installation *Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory*<sup>23</sup> was commissioned by curators Inês Moreira and Aneta Szyłak to be part of the exhibition *Buildings & remnants: Essay-project on post-industrial spaces* presented at Guimarães 2012 European Capital of Culture<sup>24</sup>. The installation responded to the curators' challenge considering the need for dialogue of my intervention with the others commissioned for the event from areas as distinct as art, architecture, photography, design, sound, cinema, engineering, history, archaeology, anthropology and restoration, with visual and methodological contributions from artists and researchers. The dialogue of the installation with other interventions present in the exhibition allowed the possibility of different readings from different perspectives, which would not have happened so markedly if the installation had been presented publicly solo.

*Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* intended to promote a reflection on the (albeit partial) abandonment of industry in Portugal at a time when, in the current economic situation, a reindustrialisation plan is being discussed. The installation therefore constituted an invitation to memory through the tangible. I was interested in exploring and working with the notion of the past in a practical exercise of recovery, reconstruction, and reinvention of image and identity processes.

With the «contamination» exercise — which resulted in the creation of the product label «Cento & vinte» («One hundred & twenty») — it was my intention to recover composition and printing processes through the manual nature of the letterpress process, nowadays widely understood as an obsolete system, without any use of digital editing processes. Working from concrete heritage, in this case the internal letterpress workshop and all the typographic elements available at Confiança factory premises, it was my intention to reinvent the memory of the namesake brand in contemporary times. With the clear objective of preserving this graphic memory and its material heritage, I was interested in preserving work processes stemming from the objects with a great focus on the manual aspect of human gestures. The product name was chosen to celebrate the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the brand, following a similar rationale developed by the factory in previous years.

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<sup>23</sup> COELHO, 2013b.

<sup>24</sup> MOREIRA, ed., 2013.

## 6. Gorreana products (2015)

By invitation of the *Walk&Talk* festival on the island of São Miguel in the Azores<sup>25</sup>, in 2015 I was invited to develop an artistic residency to explore the images produced by the Gorreana tea factory and plantation<sup>26</sup> throughout its history. Like *Confiança*, Gorreana once had an in-house letterpress workshop that produced the packaging and labels of its own products. Following a similar rationale to that of the *Cento & vinte* project, this exercise was also based on the reutilisation and reactivation of composition and printing processes through the letterpress process. For this, the typographic characters, engravings and printing presses of Tipografia Micaelense<sup>27</sup> were used, the only one on the island of São Miguel that still retains this type of materiality.

In a process of memory preservation and an exercise of printing recovery, four new samples of packaging for Gorreana's product range were created, as well as a limited series of two engravings. Over the two weeks of the artistic residency that was developed with Nuno Neves from the *Serrote* project<sup>28</sup>, free access to the workshop was given to visitors to be able to follow the various stages of the production of the artefacts.

## 7. *The face of Confiança* exhibition (2016)

I was invited in 2016 by the municipality of Braga to coordinate the content production for the exhibition *The face of Confiança* at the Casa dos Crivos gallery in Braga. In this relatively small space, divided into two floors, the two plinths of the *Archive of Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory* were placed in central positions relative to each floor. Around it, covering the walls of the gallery, about two hundred photographs were placed, picturing social life inside the factory — official visits by state figures, annual Christmas parties, as well as other moments of gatherings. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to identify people portrayed in the photographs using sticky notes. In this way, I sought to gather more information about the visual documents in an attempt to foster the research for the subsequent production of the following exhibition, which took place a year later, as well as for the book about the history of the factory that was being developed.

The exhibition was complemented by the organisation in the same space of two gatherings with current and former workers and descendants of the founding families of the factory. As the word «face» in the title sought to indicate, this first moment of a diptych had its focus on the human dimension of *Confiança*.

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<sup>25</sup> *Walk&Talk* [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.walktalkazores.org>>.

<sup>26</sup> «GORREANA» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.gorreana.pt>>.

<sup>27</sup> «TIPOGRAFIA MICAELENSE» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.facebook.com/tipografiamicaelense>>.

<sup>28</sup> «SERROTE» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.serrote.com>>.



Fig. 8. Detail of *The face of Confiança* exhibition (2016)

Source: Nuno Coelho

### 8. A *(hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* exhibition and book (2017)

A year later, in 2017, I coordinated the content production for a second exhibition in the same space, titled *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)*. This second moment responded in a more pragmatic and institutional way to the challenge launched a year earlier. The exhibition was divided into two phases: on the ground floor, scientific contents were shown in a more concentrated arrangement; while on the upper floor artistic contents were displayed in a layout with greater space between the four works.

As scientific content, various objects created or recreated on purpose were presented. On the first wall, the most visible from the outside, a series of large-scale soap and perfume labels was reproduced as posters. Due to the visual impact of their shapes and colours, this was the appealing element to encourage visitors to enter the gallery. On the opposite wall, a three-level historical chronology was created, creating a parallel between historical events in the world, in Portugal and in Confiança. Throughout this chronology, various objects (products, documents and publications) were arranged in window displays to illustrate the historical chronology. In the centre of the gallery a plinth was created displaying various objects: a television set where one could watch a movie recovered by the Portuguese Cinematheque showing the Confiança car at the National Labour Party in 1934 (the only known moving images

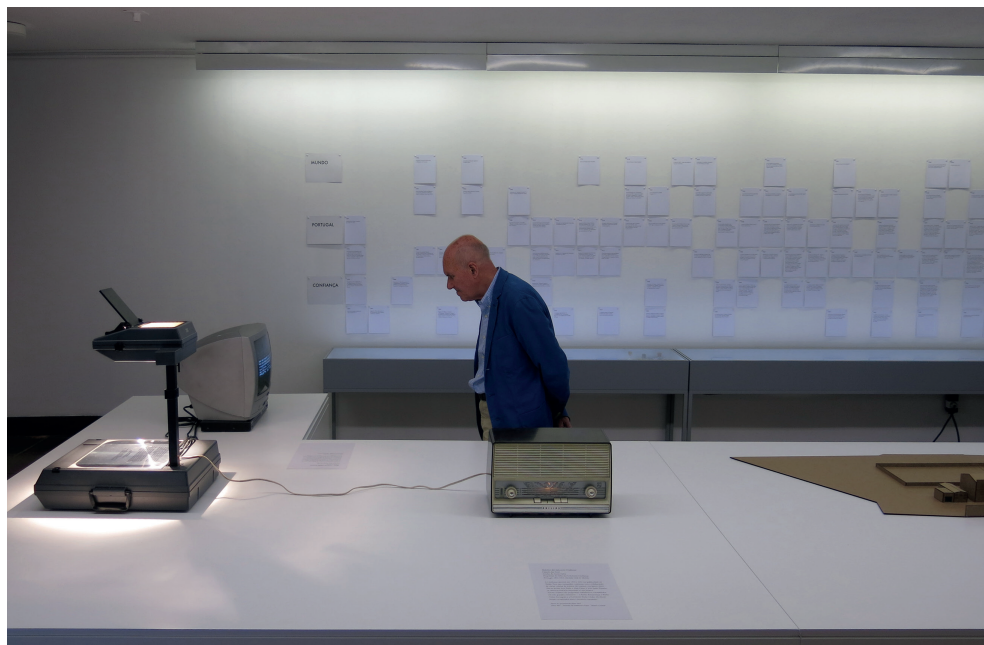


Fig. 9. Detail of *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* exhibition (2017)

Source: Nuno Coelho



Fig. 10. Detail of *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* exhibition (2017)

Source: Nuno Coelho





Fig. 11. Detail of *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* exhibition (2017)

Source: Nuno Coelho

of the twentieth century related to the factory)<sup>29</sup>; a radio set broadcasted *Confiança* sponsored radio shows of 1952/53, recovered by the Institute of Ethnomusicology (INET-md); and a re-creation of a model of the factory at its height (1950s), strongly inspired by the existence in 1944 of a similar model.

As artistic content, four works were presented, two of them created for the purpose of being presented for the first time in this exhibition. On one of the walls on the top floor, a series of photographs of the interior of the factory produced by photographer Mariano Piçarra for *Encontros da Imagem* (an international photography and visual arts festival in Braga)<sup>30</sup> in 1999 was presented. On the opposite wall, a photograph of the exterior of the factory produced by photographer Paulo Catrica for the same event the next year was presented. From one corner of the room it was possible to hear musician Manuel Dordio's interpretation of a song titled «Morna do Minho» composed by Alberto Pimenta for *Confiança* possibly in the 1930s, recovered after the discovery of the original musical sheet<sup>31</sup>. Finally, in the gallery's auditorium, a

<sup>29</sup> «CINEMATECA DIGITAL» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.cinematca.pt/Cinematca-Digital/Ficha.aspx?obraid=2504&type=Video>>.

<sup>30</sup> «ENCONTROS DA IMAGEM» [s.d.]. Available at <<http://www.encontrosdaimagem.com>>.

<sup>31</sup> COELHO, 2017a: 238.



Fig. 12. View of *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)* exhibition (2017)

Source: Nuno Coelho

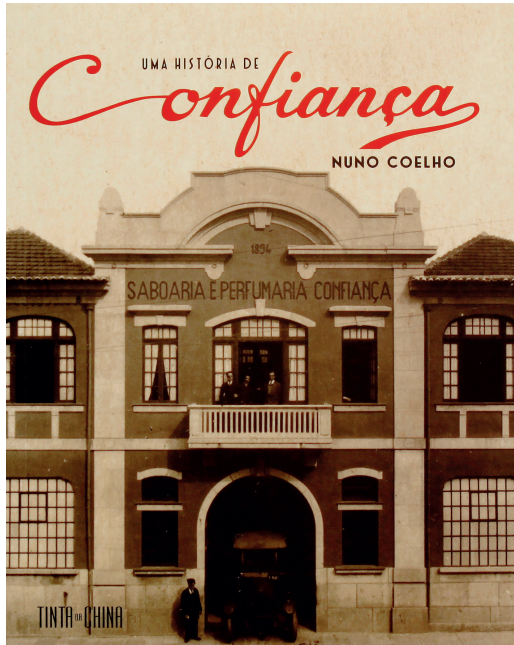
video by artist Luciana Fina showed the factory in operation, in what was the only known moving images of Confiança, was presented.

In this exhibition, as in the previous one, the private collection of packaging and labels served as a motto for the production of knowledge, seeking to establish a dialogue with objects of another nature, from archives or expressly produced for the purpose, as a way of demonstrating the discourse potential present in the collections.

During the exhibition *A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)*, the namesake book was launched<sup>32</sup>. Its presentation served as the theme for one of the regular sessions titled *Local history sessions* organised by the municipality of Braga. The book reproduces the history of Confiança, profusely illustrated with graphic motifs from the packaging and labels produced by Confiança Soap and Perfume Factory since its foundation in 1894. The book, with a preface by José Manuel Lopes Cordeiro and published by the publisher Tinta da China, was supported by the Braga City Council, Confiança and the A Vida Portuguesa project.

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<sup>32</sup> COELHO, 2017a.



**Fig. 13.**

*A (hi)story of Confiança (Confidence)*  
book (2017)

Source: Nuno Coelho

### **9. 5<sup>th</sup> notebook – Essay on Rivoli archives exhibition and publication (2017)**

The methodologies tested and applied in previous projects related to the industrial fabric were first applied to another type of institution when I was commissioned to explore the archives of Rivoli – Municipal Theatre of Porto. For its 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the exhibition *5<sup>th</sup> notebook – Essay on Rivoli archives* was developed, as well as a publication of the same name. The project set out to look for the physical traces of the activity of this cultural facility — posters, programmes, photographs, press releases, activity reports, video records of cultural activities, among many others. Even though this project was not developed from a private collection but rather from an institutional archive, I tried to implement the same concepts of research and methodologies as undertaken in the previous projects. In the same way, the intention was to draw narratives from the material culture, transporting what had been «silenced» into a position of centrality, emphasising narratives normally invisible to the general public. A single exhibition device was created, bringing together objects of different typologies in order to explore the concept of the archive as a case study. In turn, in the namesake publication launched within the scope of the exhibition<sup>33</sup>,

<sup>33</sup> COELHO, 2017b.

it was possible to explore the concept of retrieving a past memory, by publishing a part of the archive, thus enabling an act of remembrance and regeneration.

## **10. Untitled (ongoing)**

I am currently developing a research on racist representations on packaging and labels produced in Portugal throughout the twentieth century to this date; the development of a cultural product is also expected from this research. The research for this project is based on the observation of the choice of brand names (words) and their associated images (pictorial elements) that were registered from the late nineteenth century by consulting the Industrial Property Bulletins stored at the National Institute of Industrial Property (INPI)<sup>34</sup>. This research aims to better understand designers as image creators in the process of identity construction in the Portuguese colonial era and its legacies in present times.

## **THE NEED FOR A DESIGN ARCHAEOLOGY**

Following the formalisation of the enlarged internal market of the European Economic Community in 1986, although Portuguese companies were now able to reach a size that the limited Portuguese market could not assure them, on the other hand they were faced with increased difficulties in maintaining competitiveness. The illusion of national production being able to reach a geographically wider market actually was translated into an opposite reality. Portuguese companies were not prepared to compete with foreign multinationals, whose products invaded our country and won the preference of consumers. With the arrival of a «brave new world», Portuguese historical trademarks began to be connoted with an archaic, retrograde and anachronistic past. Not only did Portuguese companies fail to succeed in the European common market, but they also lost significant domestic shares. Portuguese industry declined in the 1990s, and many manufacturers went through painful insolvency proceedings or subsisted poorly in the ensuing decades.

This ongoing struggle for survival in a globalised market has led companies to focus their energies and efforts on those aspects considered most critical for their maintenance, relegating the organisation and maintenance of their archives, records and files to a secondary or even non-existent plane. This reality, coupled with the fact that there is no specific legislation in Portugal regulating the preservation of this type of industrial memory, has the consequence of the current practice not systematising the documentation produced and not safeguarding their archives, in particular with regard to graphic archives and their related documentation.

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<sup>34</sup> COELHO, 2016.

As a reflection of this legal vacuum, it is common practice when companies go bankrupt or even face less prosperous times for their archives to be destroyed. In the constant struggle for survival and permanence in the market, there are few companies that concentrate their efforts on safeguarding their archives and even in companies that do not go through periods of economic difficulties, there is no culture of preservation, documentation and recording of their memory.

I recognise that the physical traces of industrial activity are an important contribution to the writing of our collective history. I refer not only to the architectural remnants, which are gradually disappearing from our landscape or being converted into other types of spaces, but also from the graphic remnants. This dramatic situation needs to be urgently and strongly counteracted through a systematic safeguarding effort. Therefore, a widespread intervention to preserve and research this heritage, which is crucial for the knowledge and understanding of collective history and memory, becomes urgent. It is precisely in this context that I have set my most recent work.

The fact that there are few industrial museums in Portugal, and these are essentially of municipal agency, having no national scope, demonstrates precisely this deficit, and it is necessary and urgent to redefine the concepts of industrial museology in Portugal. In addition to industrial historians and archaeologists, researchers and practitioners from other disciplines such as artists and designers should be called upon to play an active role in these processes.

Fortunately, there is currently growing academic interest in this subject, as is the case with the increasing amount of research developed in this area. In the commercial area, we can notice this rescue process through projects such as *A Vida Portuguesa* and the growing number of initiatives that it has been inspiring and stimulating. This revaluation of the industrial material universe produced before the formalisation of the concept of design privileges the symbolic character of the products, giving it a value that goes far beyond its functional aspect. These academic and commercial projects broaden audiences by «digging up» a significant portion of artefacts from our collective history, in line with the process of «rediscovering» the recent past and, to some extent, the loss of our «fear of existing»<sup>35</sup>. If it can be concluded from my research that the business and the industrial fabric only values its history, artefacts or archives if it recognises commercial value in them, then it is most useful to exploit this economic potential of memory.

## WRAPPING UP (OR CONCLUSION)

Since my research orientation focuses on memory issues of different natures (historical, industrial, collective and individual, among others), I believe it is

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<sup>35</sup> GIL, 2008.

essential to establish a cross reading between the discipline of design and other areas of knowledge, namely art, history, industrial archaeology, semiotics, ethnography, economics and sociology, since the intersection of different areas of knowledge is an intrinsic feature of the discipline of design. «Therefore, a contaminated narrative construction was assumed, since interdisciplinarity also belongs to the genetic code of design. Design understood here not only as a profession, but also as a cultural and configurative activity»<sup>36</sup>. Nevertheless, despite the essential contributions of different areas of knowledge used in my research, I favour the perspective of design in reading the various information collected and in the subsequent production of meaning from it.

I understand design as a discipline based on the binomial science/art, where the former is widely preferred and valued in academia. In an attempt to counteract the tendency of this discipline to be regarded essentially as a factor of commercial purpose, having been constantly treated as a minor art<sup>37</sup>, I have recurrently decided to explore the artistic component of design, a field in which I have developed much of my recent production as a «designer-author».

In his 1934 essay *The author as a producer*, Walter Benjamin<sup>38</sup> defended the blurring of boundaries between artistic genres, between writing and reading, creation and editing. Within the discipline of design in recent decades, his ideas have been explored around expanding the role of the designer beyond that of just a service provider. In turn, Lupton points out that at the root of the designation «designer as author» lies the desire to encourage «designers to initiate content, to work in an entrepreneurial way rather than simply reacting to problems and tasks placed before them by clients. The word author suggests agency, intention, and creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling, and formatting. Authorship is a provocative model for rethinking the role of the graphic designer at the start of the millennium; it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin»<sup>39</sup>.

Through the study and analysis of artefacts of material culture, my research orientation seeks, in a broad sense, to develop mechanisms for the preservation of our identity and memory as a collective. Assuming that «the contribution of collectors to the history of Portuguese design is the safeguarding of artefacts»<sup>40</sup>, I tried to enumerate possible contributions of transferring a private collection into the public

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<sup>36</sup> BARBOSA, 2011: 5.

<sup>37</sup> DUARTE, FERREIRA, JOÃO, 2009: 2.

<sup>38</sup> BENJAMIN, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> LUPTON, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> SILVA, 2017: 155.

domain from scientific knowledge as an academic researcher, from my practice as a designer, and from my subjectivity as a collector.

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# THE GRAPHIC DESIGN COLLECTOR IN HIS LABYRINTH

SOFIA ROCHA E SILVA\*

**Abstract:** *Graphic design collectors are key agents in recovery and preservation of graphic objects. These collectors guarantee survival for a group of fragile artefacts that can be central elements in the development and new research of Portuguese Graphic Design History. Nonetheless, they face challenges: both social, disciplinary and chronological. This article aims to express some of those difficulties, as well as try to lift the veil of a rich subject inside Graphic Design History and rehearse some answers to why the challenges may occur.*

**Keywords:** *graphic design history; collections; archive; Portuguese graphic design; digital age.*

**Resumo:** *Os coletores de design gráfico são agentes-chave na recuperação e na preservação de objetos gráficos. Estes colecionadores garantem a sobrevivência de um grupo de artefactos frágeis que podem ser elementos centrais no desenvolvimento e na nova investigação da História do Design Gráfico Português. No entanto, enfrentam desafios: tanto sociais como disciplinares e cronológicos. Este artigo pretende expressar algumas dessas dificuldades, bem como tentar levantar o véu de um tema rico dentro da História do Design Gráfico e ensaiar algumas respostas às razões pelas quais os desafios podem ocorrer.*

**Palavras-chave:** *história do design gráfico; coleções; arquivo; design gráfico português; era digital.*

Graphic Design History is a recent subject. In some ways we cannot even name it a *subject* because, as consequence of its many challenges, it was never able to create a strong and collective body of knowledge<sup>1</sup>. This was not by flaw but by circumstance: since the 1960s Graphic Design, specifically in Portugal, was viewed as a *disciplinary field*, and disciplinary fields are not subjects but rather areas of exchange between them, with not define borders<sup>2</sup>.

It is relevant to ask if there is a need, in this era, to define those borders, or if we should be embracing its flow as disciplinary field. Should we pursue the creation of a Great History of Portuguese Graphic Design? Or is it unnecessary, if not outdated, to do so? In any case this discussion is one exclusive to graphic designers, it is a closed process of discourse and response. Much like what happens to graphic design objects.

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<sup>1</sup> BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994]: 77.

<sup>2</sup> António Sena da Silva, 1994 interview for «Expresso» newspaper, cited by BÁRTOLO, 2006.

Pedro Piedade Marques<sup>3</sup> names this an *endogamic process*, and explains:

*most times it is an older student of a designer [that would have kept its graphic estate]. For example, if you would want to see pieces and sketches of Câmara Leme you would have to speak with [Henrique] Cayatte. [...] It is still a very endogamic process, like many things in Portugal, everything stays in the same place. Now, you try to explain someone from the outside [...] why [...] in the middle of tons of paper you pick that poster, why don't you pick the little bronze piece, why do you choose that piece of paper with 40 or 50 years old, with traces of bugs? What is its value? That is very hard to explain.*

In Portuguese Graphic Design, the rescue process and the memory itself is kept in a small circle of professionals, families, friends and some collectors, by inheritance or gift, rarely being exhibited, shown to an audience or made public to the eyes and pockets of general collectors. It was this restrict access, we suppose, that allowed some of them to survive the lack of public interest, but it is also that which oblige graphic design collectors to pursue heirs and families to find design estates.

This pursuit is difficult. Not only because all families have their problems, but also because many Portuguese Graphic Designers saw it as a minor craft to pay bills and history was not very kind. Pedro Piedade Marques<sup>4</sup> blames the lack of visual literacy for that disappearance — we let them disappear. Even designers whose work and memory is kept by others who met them and can be revived by oral recording, the lack of archive, of objects, to support it can be an obstacle to research. He gives the example of Sérgio Guimarães, designer, among other things, of a well-known poster of the Carnation Revolution:

*Sérgio Guimarães, who is mostly known for having made that poster [...] of the child that puts carnations in a G3: you can't find anything about him. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Completely made dust in history. You find some books he published, some legends, some stories. I was trying to make a book about him. It's very complicated. People remember, they tell you some jokes, people with seventy years old or more. Getting information on him is possible through his former partner of many years, Lia Gama, but it's scattered information. It is very hard to build a Sérgio Guimarães collection. You gather some things, but sorting them out and getting information about the objects is a hard task.*

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewed and cited by SILVA, 2017: 54.

<sup>4</sup> SILVA, 2017: 56.

It is a prolonged lack of visual literacy, originated in the presentness condition Andrew Blauvelt<sup>5</sup> presented. Its results, a deficit of design objects market and dispersion of existent artefacts. Nonetheless, there is an optimistic approach that these objects are somewhere waiting to be awoken.

In the last five years there was unprecedented development in Portuguese Graphic Design History, built with its own methodology and vocabulary<sup>6</sup>, as well as a growing interest in recover, select and preserve graphic design heritage and its actors<sup>7</sup>. This recent development, though, brings its own challenges: the hunt for artefacts, most of them of paper and so quite fragile, is not easy because graphic design objects have a sense of *presentness*<sup>8</sup> which implies they intimately belong to their own time and hinder any historical sensibility around them. Who would feel tempted to keep an envelope of an electric bill, even though it has a logo that ten years from now may not exist? A collector might have been.

Collectors are key to the survival of objects. They are the most passionate people in this Earth<sup>9</sup>. Collectors of books, newspapers, magazines, posters, packages, labels, wrapping paper, prints, erasers, boxes, frames, illustration, stickers, pins, brochures, matrixes, sketches, photography's, notebooks. Some are more publicly active, others keep their collection strictly private, but in almost every graphic design collection we can find unique objects that help, or can help, to enrich graphic design history and to preserve its collective memory.

When we speak about preservation of collective memory, we mean not only the rescue of past artefacts but also the record and systematisation of present ones. The second one makes the first one easier, long term.

Many times, the graphic design collector is everything at once: practicing designer, professor, collector, researcher, curator, editor. Because collecting demands a skill to select and evaluate the collector aims to become a specialist in its subject. Like so, he will have a will to develop knowledge about his collection, by means thinking, researching or writing, especially when the subject has some public interest. In graphic design, the consequences of this specialisation can be presentations, books and exhibitions.

The activeness of graphic design collectors and the fact that some of them are practicing designers don't mean they are more careful with their own personal archives neither that their collections span to present time. In the research *Privado/Público: colecionadores de design gráfico português*<sup>10</sup> six case studies were presented, all of them

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<sup>5</sup> BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994].

<sup>6</sup> BÁRTOLO, 2012: 73.

<sup>7</sup> QUINTELA, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> BLAUVELT, 2014 [1994]: 78.

<sup>9</sup> BALZAC, 1847, cited by SILVA, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> SILVA, 2017.

graphic design collectors. Although some apply the same organisational (and almost obsessive) spirit to their own work archives<sup>11</sup>, others don't treat their own work as necessary to a bigger and more complete archive of Graphic Design History; also, it is relevant to consider that most collections are nostalgic and their focus is rarely on more recent objects. The question that poses is, then, who is collecting the present?

One could think that in the Information Era it should be easier to keep track of graphic objects being created, and even easier to widespread images and references of Portuguese design, however, for them to appear online there must be someone uploading them. In this sense, after the advent of blogs, when things looked more promising, the advent of social networks arrived. It is impossible to create archive in social networks — they are closed, hermetic and populous websites, and, without a search engine, our information, most times, will be confined to a personal network.

Adding to that, the mainstream of digital brings a scarcity of print graphics, not only because there are new audiences and new needs we are creating for, but for budget reasons (punk no longer means printed posters in the street, there is a new low-cost in town).

In a more and more dematerialised world, it is wise to think what the future of graphic design collectors is as we know them. They seem to be dependent on the production of printed objects, so it looks paradoxical that there is a concern with diminishing graphic collectibles at the same time there are much more designers than ever.

As shelves of objects transform themselves into lists of folders, how does the concept of collection survive in the digital world? For sure there will always be collections, groups of things someone gather and relates emotionally to. We like objects, especially those that are symbols to our knowledge, and have a natural tendency to amass them.

Certain types of collections already face extinction, like philately or numismatic. Collections that previously had the alibi of spreading culture, a way of reaching the world, are now obsolete<sup>12</sup>. How many new collectors of coins do you know?

It is plausible that graphic design collectors will only collect graphic material until the 2000s, or that prints of this millennia will become rarer and so valuable, but how do the collections are going to adapt to digital design? A large part of present graphic design production is in the web, is it condemned to vanish as soon as it is posted? How can we adapt our concept of memory preservation, of collection and archive, so it can survive the challenges of the digital age?

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<sup>11</sup> Like designer Antero Ferreira, studied in SILVA, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Jorge Silva, interviewed and cited by SILVA, 2017: 145.

Portuguese Graphic Design History and its collectors are starting to gain momentum in the age of the web, risking a race against time. It would be expected that we were looking for solutions for the present and creating mechanisms that guaranteed survival of the archive and recorded the present, however the collective will seem to be stuck in an old idea, more ambitious, to solidify History and its icons. We already know we can't build it like we were in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we know that web, the fluidity of the graphic designer today (who is also a producer, a critic, a curator, a teacher, a collector) and the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a tremendous weight over our fragile subject. We know we don't have the body of knowledge of the History of Art neither the professional recognition of Architecture, but we persist, try to collaborate and seem to be closer. We also know that there were past attempts but they left fragile foundations. Will this be it?

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# DESIGN OBJECTS MUSEALIZATION, DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

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