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Standard Cataloguing of Augmented Objects for a Design Museum

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Standard Cataloguing of Augmented Objects for a Design Museum

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Abstract. Demo-ethno-anthropological assets belonging to the cultural heritage are not "autonomous" but represent the nodes of a complex system of relations. Their narration – for the purposes of knowledge and cultural diffusion – cannot transcend this relational dimension that recognises an enormous potential for development in the application of digital culture and in the prudent use of augmented reality. In the perspective of a design museum, it is therefore necessary to accompany each artefact / asset with a digital matrix that provides accurate information in relation to its critical interpretation. The exposure of an augmented object, in fact, allows to read better its use and social value along specific interpretative lines. This essay summarizes the study of a new type of archive – the animated archive of cultural materials – intended as a system of standard cataloguing of objects for a museum on design. Moreover, it is based on the critical comparison between the contribution of ludic humanism and the augmented narrative. This comparison is necessary because the rhetorical and design systems of the playful narrative offers interesting information for the realization of virtual – and non – exhibits, since the type of involvement and the environment required by the spectator is very similar; but above all because games are an important experimentation of interactive models of learning and cultural production.

1. The design to exhibit immobile objects

The Italian Design Museum was inaugurated in Milan in 2019 within the display spaces that has occupied the *Triennale* since 1927. The permanent exhibit houses about 200 of the most representative objects of Italian production from 1948 to 1981, selected from the more than 1600 pieces collected by the *Triennale Foundation* in almost one hundred years of activity, and long listed in its collection and archives. The aim of the Italian Design Museum is certainly to make the interesting collection of objects accessible and disseminated but allows these pages to address a reflection on the themes of institutionalizing design as a "culturally proper activity" and to reflect on the real methods used for its enhancement, protection and targeted systematization. The permanent exhibit setting is very minimal: "simple and straight-forward, the collection aims to give maximum prominence to the works, organized in chronological order, provides insights into history, poetics and context in which the work was designed" – as you can read on the Triennale website – and it has raised some doubts, precisely in relation to its typology. It is white walls, white support bases, spaced from each other, objects *ad hoc* illuminated with regular and strong light. In this way the design objects are exposed as beautiful

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artwork, as icons to admire, silent and immobile: the spectator is faced with objects that are, certainly, "of design" but which speak little "of the design".

The Milanese Museum committee actually announced the exhibit orientation method would focus on narratives at the opening of the project. This was intended as an in-depth analysis of the history and context in which each object was designed. In fact, the objects were accompanied as much as possible with photographic material, related advertising campaigns, original packaging and interesting interviews with the direct protagonists and designers who can be listened to by the spectators along the way. But in reality, both the choice of a setting that, perhaps, still too reminiscent of a 19th century art museum and the principle of telling the viewer "how a design object looks" and not "what it means". It returns a sequence of immobile objects to the spectator. These say little about the type of discourse that design presents to the viewers with the objects. Few of them are dynamic links with the announced narratives, that are already widely used in other shows dedicated to design or other.

It is true that since the opening of the first design museums (starting from the Design Museum of the MOMA in New York in 1929), the method of exhibiting the objects has always followed the one most traditionally used for works of art: neutral background, possibly white, single objects visible and well separated from the others, summary sheets with basic information (author, date, short description). But between an artwork and a design object there is no negligible difference: the first was born for an aesthetic utility, to be contemplated and the attention around it in a museum does nothing but increase the aesthetic possibility of the spectators to enjoy it. The second, on the contrary, follows a practical utility, it is made to satisfy a human need, *simply* to be used. So, when you want to express the value of an object, it is ideologically wrong to consider it loaded with a symbolic meaning that transcends the sphere of its concrete use.

The "objects of design" are not symbols of something else that transcends them and that ignores their function. On the contrary, starting from their function (instrumental, social, cultural), design objects acquire and emanate all their human and social sense, since they are already born for an environment, which is that of the human experience.

Already Arthur Drexler, director of the Department of Architecture and Design of the Museum of Modern Art in 1934, in the introduction to the text *The design collection: selected objects*, wrote: "If they were dug out of the desert a thousand years from now, the objects in the Museum's Design Collection would tell archaeologists – even those from another planet – something about the people who made, used and treasured them" (1970:6). This sentence highlights the value of an object which lies in its being a witness of the community that uses it. Therefore, it shares specific contexts and real conditions with the community.

In this sense, the word "context" is directly related to thinking the design object as a *text*, and not as an artwork or an iconic sign. The "object as a text" is a complex network of expressive and semantic forms: it is internally coherent, because it maintains its constituent elements coherent (when its designer manages to "govern" all the constraints), and is externally coherent because capable of opening up, "talking", with other *text-objects* circulating in its socio-cultural universe. For many years, however, the type of set up chosen by MoMA for design objects presented a sequence of immobile objects leaning against the wall, or in the center of round showcases, in which the iconic and static aspect was very evident, and little connected to the context in which the object "lived" with the community that used and designed it. But MoMA was born in an era in which virtual reality, network, widespread interactivity was at the beginning of their evolution and the use of technologies, intended as useful for a mass artistic enjoyment, not can be traced before the 90s.

In recent years, in the most modern museums (or recently rearranged), great steps forward have been made in rendering it a more active and dynamic space. This truly makes the museum "a permanent institution at the service of society and its development, open to the public, which carries out research on material and immaterial testimonies, acquires them, preserves, communicates and

especially exhibits them for study, education and pleasure purposes"². In relation to use of spaces and works the modern museum has, in fact, been open to its three fundamental tasks "to know, preserve and communicate", abandoning the more traditional "container" type. This is happening in the direction of a continuous project of interaction between "visitor-object-dedicated spaces" through a narration that is centered not so much on the artworks silently exhibited, but on the experience of the spectator dynamically involved with the works in a self-learning process. However, most museums dedicated to design still adopt very traditional display systems, in which the objects are presented as immobile iconic signs, and not as open texts, even when accompanied by in-depth materials. In this perspective, this research wanted to hypothesize a system of recovering and cataloging those contents deemed most useful for a narration of design objects in a dynamic and augmented way.

2. Mobile museum and immobile objects

Among the examples of more dynamic museums dedicated to design, there is the London Design Museum, founded in 1989 by Sir Terence Conran. Inside the museum, some innovative projects have been developed in the direction of the mobility of the relationship between space, objects and the spectator and they are the *Crowdsourcing Wall* and an interactive app. The *Crowdsourcing Wall* is a wall filled with objects chosen based on the responses of an RFC (Request for Comment), a group query, launched online by the museum itself³.

Its novelty resides both *ab origine*, as it is a clear proposal for active participation between the display structure and the public, and *in itinere* because the same public is asked several times to participate personally during the visit to stimulate reflection. The app is needed for this which allows the viewer to complain, in a playful scenario, in various tests of design ability putting himself in the shoes of a designer, posing some problems related to known objects (the subway, in particular, and a car) and proposing solutions. Using these novelties, the London Design Museum presents a historical collection of contemporary design (of the XX and XXI century) inside some rooms, divided into three sections – *Designer, Maker, User* – which follow a new content orientation methodology: highlight the relationship between the three main figures in the "world of design" – the designer, the manufacturer and the user. In the three sections, however, including the *Crowdsourcing Wall*, the objects are classically exposed: immobile and resting on pedestals, or attached to walls, or positioned inside transparent showcases.

Here too as in Milan, in practice, the *Valentine* of Sottsass (presents in the British capital in three different colors, on three identical wooden tables and with a wall of advertising posters behind it) communicates a strong stillness and the spectator understands with difficulty the fact that *Valentine* was the symbol of "freedom of writing outdoors" in the 70s. The London museum was designed for a proactive visit that stimulates the viewer's critical immersion in the world of design culture, but lacks a mobile vision of objects, a dynamic narrative of that context that Drexler already, almost a hundred years ago, had identified as the *specific value* of the objects, so fundamental as to require their display and diffusion in a museum.

The attempt at a real and less immobile narrative of design is the experiment of the Vitra Museum in Basel. Started in 1989 by the Vitra company with the plan to transform its corporate area in Weil am Rhein (Germany) into a true architectural park, the Vitra Museum is today a combination of natural and built space where you can admire projects of the most important architects in the world and a museum with a collection of fundamental objects in the history of design (over 20,000 pieces, with 7000 furniture and 1000 lamps), but also the archives of Charles & Ray Eames, George Nelson, Verner Panton and Alexander Girard. In 2016 the Vitra Museum inaugurated a sort of "warehouse of wonders", the Vitra *Schaudepot* designed by Herzog & de Meuron. Designed as a permanent exhibit

² This is the definition of "museum" given by ICOM, the International Council of Museums, the organization that is committed to preserving and conserving the museum's cultural heritage in collaboration with UNESCO.

³ Specifically, Internet users were asked to report the most important, influential and / or impactful design objects in their daily lives.

space, in the *Schaudepot* a selection of key pieces from the Vitra collection are presented in rotation: the *Schaudepot* system provides for a continuous rotation of groups of objects (approximately 430 at a time) that are removed from the huge deposit on the first floor, brought "to the surface" on the upper floor and set up in two large temporary thematic exhibits that change from year to year.

The intent of the museum is that design objects do not speak for themselves but are told through the changing relationships of their meanings: as *text-objects* – in turn, individual words of a wider context – they tell a constant display experience change. The mobility of the Vitra Museum lies in the possibility that the *Bocca* sofa by Gufram, for example, is used in different temporary exhibits: *Pop Art Design* (2012), *Radical Design* (2016), *Objects of desire: Surrealism and Design 1924-today* (2019), *100 Years: 20 Visionary Interior* (2020), showing the ability of certain objects to be the founding elements of multiple stories. But we are not talking about the simple possibility of moving them from the warehouse to the show rooms, rather to the deep reading of the meanings of the *text-objects* which allows us to "recall" them in different and always *open* narratives (Eco, 1962).

By moving the system of meanings that you want to communicate on an object from the iconic to the textual (that is, from the level of expression to that of the content), it is possible to pass from the analysis of the single *text-object* to the discourse that also involves artefacts of different nature. In other words, it is possible to really make a speech, a narration of "what the design" means (Mangano, 2008: 85). It is important to remember in this sense that any object, from a typewriter to a table, can mean different things depending on the role it plays in open narration.

3. Mobility: "*hic et nunc*" of the text-objects

The mass artistic enjoyment of art was a central topic in the discussion of aestheticians and historians at the beginning of the last century: Walter Benjamin, in his essay of 1936, claimed that the value of an artwork lies in its being *hic et nunc*, that is, in that specific place for which it was designed. This is still the theme that we can consider the quintessence of the idea of cultural heritage. According to the philosopher, an artwork, as a real historical testimony, loses its *aura* of authenticity in direct relation to its reproducibility, as it changes its relationship with space and with the masses⁴.

According to Benjamin, therefore, in the past the relationship between art and the spectator was defined by the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the work, that is, by its existence *hic et nunc*; equally, the temporal and mass dimension of modern artistic reality, would have condensed in its authenticity, compared to which any form of manual reproduction is false.

Even more critical in this direction, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970, that claims that "every work destined for many is already ideally its own reproduction" (1972, p. 175). He wanted to say that art – or rather only that which really is – runs away, however, and in any way, from the domain of reproduction, technicalization, experience instilled from outside. The development of these theories in the following decades led to rethink both the type of specific authenticity of the production of design objects, and the value of the its museum. In particular, the "culturally proper" dimension of design is recognized precisely in relation to its direct connection to repetitiveness, and to mass diffusion or, in any case, in the wider socio-cultural ambience.

A design museum, therefore, can all the more be thought of as a generating experience, which welcomes and conceives, which offers itself as *hic et nunc* to narrate the authenticity of the culture of design. No longer a place to bring *icon-objects* shown as artworks, but a laboratory in which design is re-generated and narrated in its natural and continuous movement. Like the *text-objects*, the spectator too would be welcomed into the museum not as a mere observer but as a direct, dynamic, stimulated and stimulating user. Taking advantage of this widespread dynamism, and the notion of narration of the "context" of the *text-objects*, this research wanted to study some guidelines for the creation of an animated archive system (of cultural material) able to "tell" the design in a museum.

⁴ By *aura* Benjamin means a sort of sensation, of a mystical or religious character, aroused in the spectator by the material presence of the original copy of an artwork. The *aura* is what contributes to identifying the cultural value of the artwork and that goes beyond the display.

The comparison, which began between data of other relevant research and reference standards, continued with the initial identification of three different sections useful for the construction of the narration of a *text-objects* (figure 1):

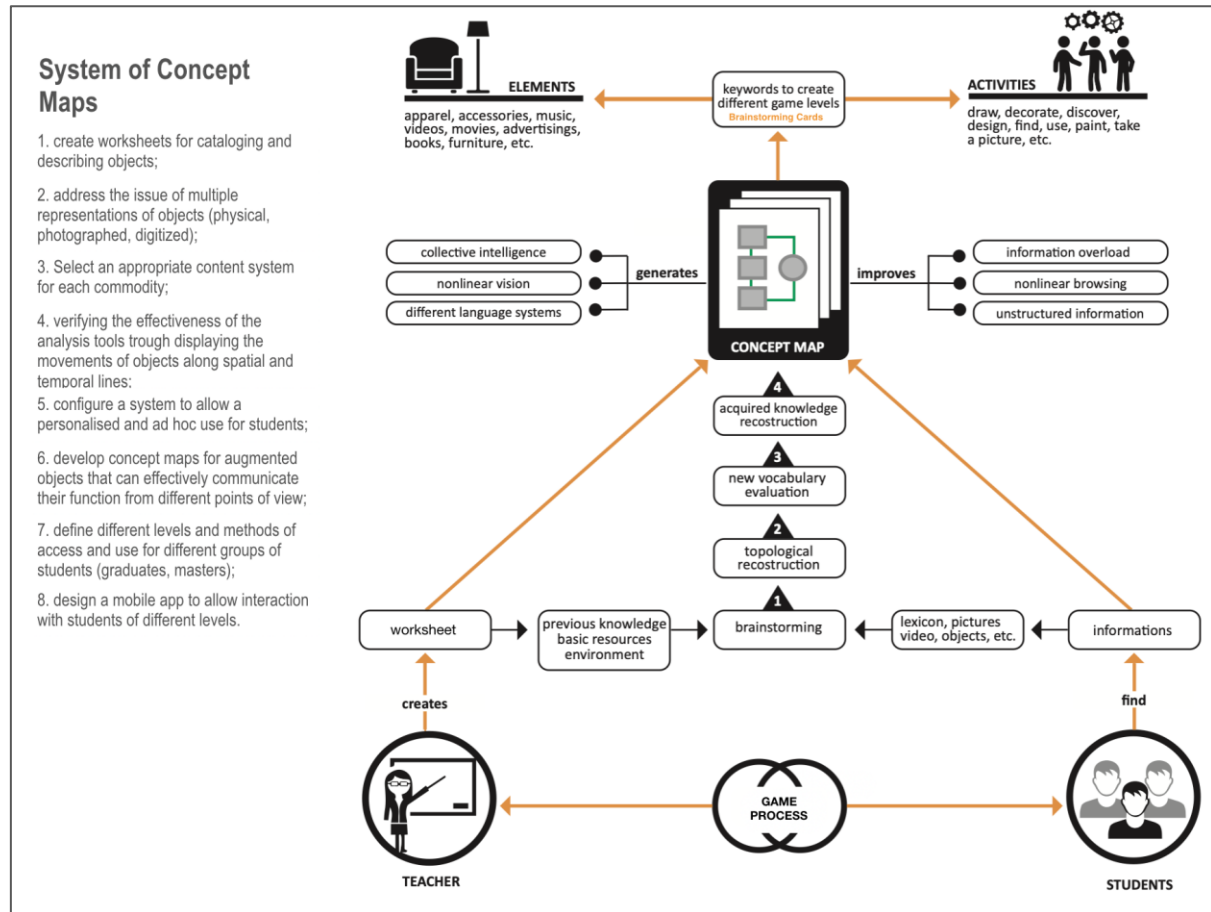


Figure 1. Conceptual map for the construction of the narration of an object-text to be exhibited.

1. Legitimation process (contextual plan): how can objects be connected with the original context and their conceptual positioning?
 - criterion a) definition of a system of invariable basic concepts with the construction of conceptual maps (examples of basic concepts: agents, activities, attributes, concepts, disciplines, forms of communication, places, materials, processes, products, styles and periods, techniques and technologies). This is a basis system of preordered resources.
 - criterion b) grouping and development of the various possible connections between the invariable basic concepts. This is a basis system of open resources.
2. Contextualization process (social recognition plan): what indications can be integrated with each other to reconstruct the experience hic et nunc of the object?
 - construction of an exhibit kaleidoscope that includes relationships with figurative arts, advertising, cinema, photography, television, magazines, technologies, environment;
 - creation of a list of terms organized in a set of clusters that present semantic or conceptual affinity, derived from the grouping and development of the classes of invariable concepts of the previous phase (criterion a). the clusters have been divided into two classes: elements and activities;

- allocation of as many terms as possible from the previous phase into sub-groups of variables.
3. Understanding process: (instrumental plan) how to highlight the consistency of the connections of all the plans of the project, both internal and external?
- definition of a static level of the system structure. In this phase, the rhetorical elements typical of a game simulation (divided into two dimensions: participatory and exploratory) were elaborated and then inserted into the system;
 - use of the method of creating worksheets designed to reconstruct the dynamic level of the system (greater number of contents identifiable with a topic / object) of design and to learn the narration of text-object in a problematic way.

The results obtained as well as being a first contribution to the systemized inventory of design objects demonstrate the need to create specific cataloging and description schemes and systems for design; to tackle the problem of multiple representations of existing objects (physical, photographic, scanned, digitized) and to configure a system to allow personalized use by user

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