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design objects: a key to understand reality

Anna Cecilia Russo, Marinella Ferrera

1. introduction

If reality is something people have to believe in or not was already the core of a questioning launched in the late nineties across the book *Pandora's Hope*, an essay on the Reality of Science Studies (Latour 1999). It actually looks as a farsighted statement, almost announcing all the changes in the perception of reality related to the massive diffusion and implementation of web and digital culture. Indeed, far from being only a pure exercise for philosophers, questioning about real world in the era of re-production, simulation, hyper-reality, virtual reality, augmented reality perfectly applies even to everyday life. How do people perceive today what is commonly called « real world », made up of material things? How have perspectives changed compared to previous generations? Moreover, and more specifically, how do design objects eventually contribute to define what real world exactly is in terms of physical space? In addition, which kind of reality do designers have in mind when approaching a new project, and do design objects themselves may help to frame pieces of time and space that we tend to perceive as real?

Questioning in terms of Pragmatism and Aesthetics suggests that any definition of real things, also in terms of expression of creativity, needs to be related to experience and practice (Shusterman 2000). Moreover, if design objects are fully accomplished only when their functional side comes to get unveiled, that is to say in use, once we activate all our senses, the fact of experiencing them can add a good percentage of certainty that what we feel is a reflection of the present, of what we tend to contextualize and call "reality".

2. design versus reality

Design theorists and critics have often focused on the importance of the role of design objects as a reference for the real world and social structure. According to Tomás Maldonado, for instance, objects shape human behavior, and they do contribute to constructing human consciousness and values (Margolin & Buchanan 1995). Design philosopher Vilém Flusser used to consider design objects as media, a kind of mediators during any communication process, stating that objects are not just thrown against us (as literally explained by Latin etymology of ob-jects " ob-jectum, thrown against someone), but, just like air, they are interposed between us and other people, so, at the same time, they let us communicate. The same idea characterizes the approach of *The Language of Things* (Sudjic 2009) where it is clearly highlighted that if design is actually a

communication tool, contemporary designers need to understand deeply their involvement in shaping a way of communicating that corresponds at the same time to the appearance given to what we call reality. How can design objects really participate in our process of perception of reality, then? How can they help us to improve our understanding of the real world? After all, objects considered in relation to their most generic meaning, are nothing but "things". German Philosopher Martin Heidegger already questioned in the thirties on what a thing essentially was and in which terms being surrounded by things could give us some parameters of our being part of the real world. *Was ist ein Ding? (What is a Thing?)* is the title of one of Heidegger most renowned works, in which his approach to reality involves the presence of things as material essences, able to define the "here and now" experiences. Though Einstein and contemporary science have challenged new visions in terms of temporal and spatial dimensions, Heidegger's approach may still be considered in line with today's philosophical point of views, especially in relation to design objects, if supported by Pragmatism and Somaesthetics. That is to say, investigating material phenomena, just like objects, in relation to inner and outside body perceptions, in terms of interaction design, as Professor Richard Shusterman and his team are currently implementing within Florida Atlantic University, in line with the research carried on at the Interaction Design Foundation in Denmark. So that, taking into account design objects in the specificity of chairs, we will first try to inquire in terms of relational communication, pragmatics and aesthetics how they can guide us through a process of decoding reality, secondly we will focus on how smart materials and new technologies can even amplify the management of perception itself.

3. why chairs?

Before illustrating the methodology followed to show how design objects can give a strong contribution to the understanding of reality, we would like to focus on our choice, briefly explaining why, among the multiform universe of design objects, we decided to draw our attention to chairs. Besides being the most anthropomorphic object of common use, dating back to ancient Egypt (i.e. hieroglyph corresponding to goddess Isis) or ancient Greece (i.e. constellation of Cassiopeia), the chair has always been enhanced by a mythic value, especially if inflected in the meaning of throne. Nowadays, it is still an object mainly defining Western societies, and its presence has gradually penetrated many different layers of several aspects of reality: from language to lifestyle, from space and environment to everyday routine. The use of a chair involves the whole body and this activates so many muscles and nerves at the point that the idea of considering it simply an object to rest could easily be contested. It is indeed a sort of indisputable truth that we spend much of our waking lives in a chair (Cranz 2000) and as Cranz states:

"What is true of the chair is true of all the artifacts we create. We design them; but once built, they shape us. As sitting in chairs spread to the common person over the centuries, it left its mark on the human body and human consciousness. The chair offers a glimpse into our collective ideas about status and honor, comfort and order, beauty and efficiency, discipline and relaxation. As our ideas change, so do our chairs" (p. 15)

But how can a chair help to get a better understanding of reality? In order to question on this point, we chose five chairs, that is to say, five theoretical case studies, to show how such an object can help a human being to get a deeper perception of some of the aspects composing and determining what we tend to define as the real world. We analyzed each case, or better each chair, such as Gerrit Rietveld's Red and Blue Chair, Verner Panton's Panton Chair, Philippe Starck's Louis Ghost, Carl De Smet's Pop up Chair and Antony Dunne & Fiona Raby's Faraday Chair, according to their structural components and in relation to their potential of incorporating and redefining the portion of physical space occupied. The volume of each chair, the interaction of its plans and lines with the surrounding space, informs inevitably the user about several factors that, once received and recalibrated, turn into useful inputs regarding the surrounding space. If we approach this question according to Pragmatism and Aesthetics point of view, we can say that, as soon as a person uses the object, the mechanisms of perception inform the body on all the coordinates needed to realize which portion of space the chair itself occupies, and how the chair may relate to the environment around. Consequently, the user gets to contextualize and acknowledge the notion of the present. According to a Pragmatism perspective, interacting with things, with objects, can definitely enhance our understanding of the external world, that is to say, reality. John Dewey, for instance, used to say that "Interaction is a universal trait of natural existence", basically, what let the "self" realize what exist and what occurs outside, that it is recognizable as knowable. Using an object can inform about space and fragments of time, both essential determinants of what we commonly perceive as "reality". Using a chair is an action that involves the whole body, as it activates some muscles and it implies a specific posture following the design that matches the lines of the body itself. While using a chair, compared to when we stand up, the visual cone changes and eye contact as well as the whole body language adapt and reset to a new level. Indeed, being seated means neither being at the floor level nor standing up. Using a chair within a room, for instance, turns into an intermediate position between floor and ceiling, a kind of well-regulated suspension contrasting gravity and forcing the body to release its biped position. In order to analyze how a chair can help to decode reality and to get a better understanding of what we call real world, we chose to focus on the previously mentioned examples respectively shown different perspectives in relation to the issue, that is to say a historical one, a contemporary one, and two most innovative and almost conceptual solutions.

3.1 from Rietveld to Kartell: framing reality and aesthetics in terms of chairs design

For what concerns the historical point of view, the chair that entirely caught our attention was the Red and Blue one by architect and designer Gerrit Rietveld, first realized in 1917, in a kind of "nature" version, as the colors we usually associate to its design were only added in the early twenties. Italian design company Cassina acquired this chair's rights in 1965 and especially since then, due to several reproductions, museums bookshops, magazines, and exhibitions it

has gradually turned into a true design icon. Starting from 1965, this chair was turned into a true piece of design, as previously it was not considerably produced in series, though conceived for an industrial oriented chain of production. The Red and Blue Chair is indeed a clear example of how theories about world representation in four dimensions can be effectively represented not only by a mathematical formula but also by a functional object. Gerrit Rietveld was indeed a member of Dutch movement de Stijl, centered on Neoplasticism that, as widely known, deeply characterized the painting of both Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. A geometric approach to reality, accordingly also to Minkowski mathematical theories, had already strongly influenced Cubism during the very first part of the XX century and, in the same way, it also impacted on neoplastic painters and architect Gerrit Rietveld. The deconstruction and reconstruction of what we call reality, or maybe better to say "physical space", through geometrical surfaces and the intersections of plans is clearly visible also in the design of the Red and Blue Chair, in which lines and plans intersect thanks to the Cartesian Knot.

Moreover, the Red and Blue Chair is considered a true icon of Modernism and as Gijs van Tuyl, former Director of Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum says, reported in the book *Rietveld's Chair* (Kuper & Reitsma 2014):

'The most innovative aspect was the way it was placed in space. A chair had always been an object in space, but now space was part of the object. Thus the infinity of that space is continued in the chair' (p.13).



Image 1. red and blue by Gerrit T. Rietveld_courtesy - cassina

Image 2. panton chair by Verner Panton_courtesy vitra

Space is no doubt an essential aspect of what we call "reality" and through the Red and Blue Chair is then possible to visualize how it can interact with a design object, making the object itself be the materialization of the assumptions defining what space, and then, a face of reality might be. However, why should a designer be intrigued by the analysis of this side of a design object? Usually a designer knows, and sometimes even

takes for granted, the fact that geometrical shapes, once combined and assembled, can generate new artificial entities, such as design objects, fully characterized by a specific functionality and thought for a specific purpose within what we call "reality". It is up to Aesthetics and especially to Pragmatism to help decode and deconstruct how these design objects silently shape our lives through emotions, affecting behaviors as well as our perspectives of the real world. A very iconic chair also able to provide with interesting inputs regarding the interaction between human body and surrounding physical space in order to unveil an aspect of the real world is the Panton Chair by Verner Panton and produced by Vitra.



Image 3. panton chair by verner panton_courtesy vitra

Its anthropomorphic references determine a strong complementary relationship with the user, whose body fits perfectly into the sinuosity of its shapes. Its concavities host human body almost fusing with it and creating a synthetic shell that goes from the neck to the feet, at the point that the shape of the chair itself seems to mimic human body, thus intimating the intended use (Farven 1999, p.31). This provides, in terms of space, a definition of a perimeter in which the user is confined while actively practicing this design object, making their feel part of the wholeness of the object itself, while becoming something else in relation to what stays outside this portion of space. The way a person sits is inevitably a way a person perceives space, not only the surrounding space, but also their own space, which after all makes the difference in the whole perception of reality by any single human being. Another chair that stimulated our interest was the Louis Ghost, conceived by French designer Philippe Starck and produced by Italian company Kartell. Launched in 2002, it immediately conquered a wide segment of market, reaching an unexpected diffusion almost worldwide. Considered as the most daring example in the world of injected polycarbonate in a single mold, what has played a main role in the success of this chair is the transparency combined with a revisited quintessence of baroque, besides its being shock and weather resistant. It is certainly not the first transparent chair, but for sure the first that reached such a capillary distribution, while being able, at the same time, to shape and redesign spaces and places. It is Philippe Starck himself to say that the iconicity of this chair and its power to redefine the surrounding environment stays in the essence of being a bridge between past and present. Besides this, thanks to its phenomenology, the fact of being so discreet and easy to camouflage plays a kind of hide-and-seek game with reality, giving shape to the essence of nothing that comes out from a collective memory, stimulating a sentimental and nostalgic mood. It determines space

by its nothingness that, at the same time, turns into iconicity, letting the user's body be almost "naked" and absorbed by its transparency, canceling and enhancing any reference with reality. If transparency is usually associated to the idea of fragile, in the case of this chair any perplexity or suspiciousness regarding its effective capacity of receiving a human body, solidity conferred to this chair by the material itself immediately let the user change their perspective. The user sits on a chair able to let light pass through, and able to rethink and redesign the concept of physical space in terms of visual borders, revealing what hides on the other side of its volume. As typical of transparency, it implies a broader spatial order, that is to say, a simultaneous perception of different special locations (Keepy 1944). Indeed, design objects, and specifically chairs, can work then as decoders of the physical space. What about then interactive design objects, and more specifically chairs, conceived to react to external stimulations, such as objects realized with shape-memory or smart materials? Though this sector is only at an experimental stage yet, we think it is worthy to highlight the potential and the intrinsic power in terms of relational communication and Pragmatism as well. Users do not expect a chair to react to thermic or to any other kind of solicitations. A chair is normally a chair, that is to say, a still object endowed with a certain functionality, but not certainly due to interact with the surrounding environment or with the users themselves. In the middle eighties, Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico had already captured on his camera how a design chair could passively leave marks on a human body consequently to a long sitting, in the specific case of his shooting, on that of a female body. However, according to current research and prototypes, we are now moving further, and objects are more and more able to interact with the human body not simply in terms of traces left on the flesh. In the near future, it will not be any more just the case of capturing traces of human body on the surface of an object, which is the direct and logical consequence of a direct contact between surfaces, but it will be possible to generate a true interaction with material things, with design objects. Though this is only at a very experimental stage yet, it can intrigue researchers and designers to move forward to such a direction.

3.2. self-assembling, shape-memory, and no-chairs: envisioning a next seating scenario

Already in 2012 Belgian designer Carl de Smet, member of Noumenon design studio in Brussels, presented his high tech chair that can be easily squashed up to 5% of its original size to be transported and which can smartly expand back by heating up. Just to give a basic idea of how it works, he describes this expansion as that of a popcorn that pops up consequently to the heating up of the pan.

The chair is made of polyurethane based shape-memory polymers (SMPs) and it can quickly return to its original shape thanks to "shape memory effect" as an intrinsic property of this material which, in the case of this chair, it is currently programmed to pop up at a temperature of about 70 8C (Bengisu & Ferrara 2018).

If such a concept is likely to be applied to the whole universe of functional things, de Smet, for instance, is currently designing a whole furniture collection based on this kind of reactivity,

new kind of interactions and perspectives will be soon part of our everyday lives. So that, reality will be enriched of new implications and design objects, being those chairs or anything else, will help users to explore new horizons, while capturing new aspects of what a sort of new version of real world will be. Another chair, this time entirely revising the essence of its being a chair is the one created by the British conceptual designer duo composed by Dunne & Raby. Recently acquired by V&A Museum in London, though still called and presented as a chair, it looks like a sort of a box, a sanctuary where to retire safely



Image 4_Pop up chair by Carl de Smet

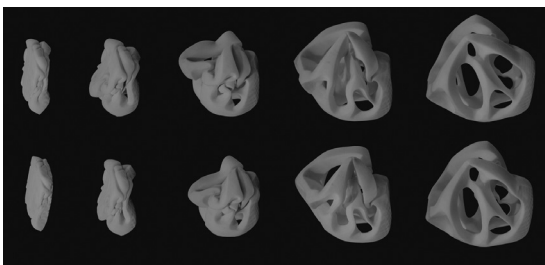


Image 5. pop up chair by carl de smet

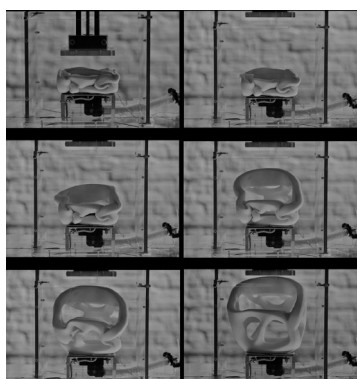


Image 6. pop up chair by Carl de Smet



Image 7_faraday chair by Dunne and Raby

The material used can indeed protect and screen from magnetic fields and electrical currents, nowadays so easily widespread in the surrounding environments, as emitted by several appliances, especially considering that during the last century, the implementation of electronic devices increased the natural electromagnetic field for about a million of times, with severe consequences on human health. Indeed the exposure to nonionizing electromagnetic fields has been directly related already since the middle nineties to cancer (Salvatore, Weitberg & Mehta 1996) and finally in 2001 even the WHO released a statement including them among the cancer-causing agents. The structural idea that stands behind is that of redesigning an object normally able to guarantee some rest – of course, traditional chairs are also used to perform different activities, but one of the functions usually associated to them is that of releasing and relieving from the standing position – transforming a chair into a sort of womblike body container. It

is called Faraday Chairs just after Michael Faraday, an early pioneer of electric research and magnetic fields, and its function goes further than that of traditionally shaped chairs. It does not offer just physical comfort, but also a psychological comfort, a challenging characteristic that contemporary design objects are increasingly requested to provide as well.

4. conclusion

If traditionally shaped chairs can provide data and parameters about the physical space surrounding the user, innovatively designed chairs will enhance the interaction with human beings and will amplify the notion of what reality is. The application of shape-memory and smart materials in general is indeed likely to be dramatically implemented in the following years, and so that more "living" objects will start to be actively part of our lives, so that of the "physical space" that we tend to describe as "reality". It will be then a clear evidence the fact that space, one of the main aspects of reality, will not be defined just in terms of physical space, but mainly in terms of psychological and both out-of-the-body as well as personal comfort. It is then time to rethink culture, design and that specific dimension that we tend to call "reality" just as perceived by the wholeness of the nature of each human being. Inner and outside body experiences in terms of solicitations, stimulations, reactions will need to be taken into account while conceiving new design objects.

This is indeed only a first stage of our research focused on how Design can effectively relate constructively to Somaesthetics, this new challenging discipline aiming to look at the whole involvement of a human being towards reality even in relation to the products of artificial, that is to say, design objects. It is then our intention to move further on this path of experimental and visionary approach to design by running workshops in which users could be seen as learners; as shapers of their environment; as becoming something else by using a device, a system or an object. Experiences that will fully plunge us into reality, letting us capture much more than just the most common aspects that we usually tend to notice and often take for granted do represent a key point all along a contemporary design thinking methodology, also strategically centered on user's needs. Moreover, the involvement of the user since the very first stages of the whole design process, if in line with a new and broader vision of the amplification of the palette of senses, will definitely strengthen our relationship with functional objects, while adding a more kaleidoscopic perspective on what we'll refer to as reality to our mind.

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