

VOLUME #01 | 2016

# THE PEARL DIVER

the designer  
as storyteller

DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS:  
STORYTELLING & DESIGN  
FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

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FOREWORD BY Marisa Galbiati & Ezio Manzini

**DESIS**  
**NETWORK**  
Design for  
Social Innovation  
and Sustainability



*To our beloved friend and colleague Mika 'Lumi'  
Tuomola. Words as smooth as stones from the sea,  
thoughts deep as the ocean, generosity without end.*

*Thank you, Mika.*

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DIPARTIMENTO DI DESIGN



**IMAGIS  
LAB**



**LUCA**  
SCHOOL  
OF  
ARTS



**INSTITUTE WITHOUT  
BOUNDARIES**

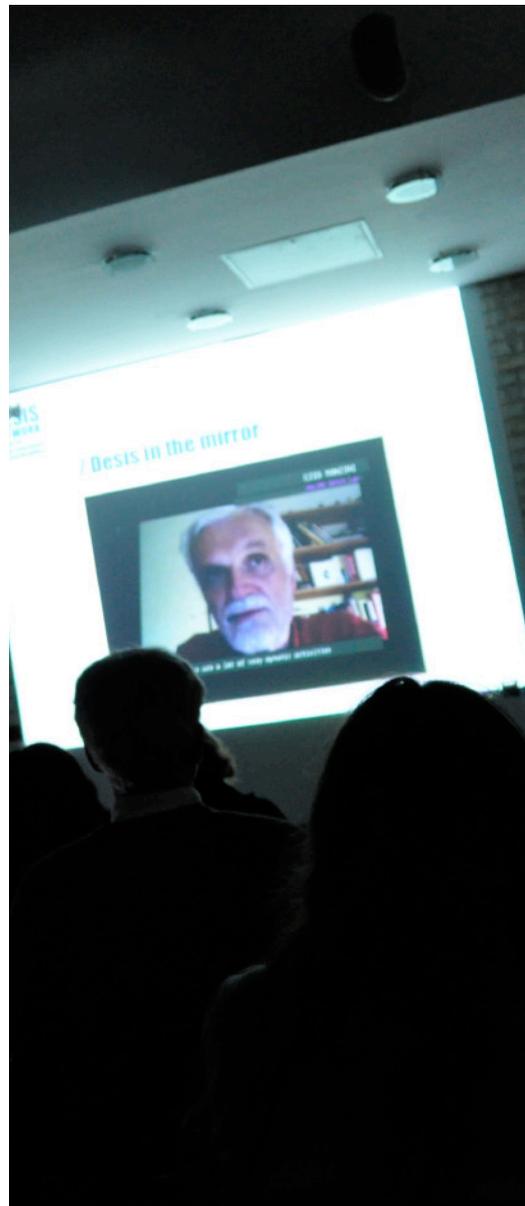
## THE PEARL DIVER

*"This thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of the extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things suffer a 'sea change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune from the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as 'thought fragments,' as something 'rich and strange.'"*

Hannah Arendt

## DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS

Since its start, DESIS Philosophy Talks have been performed in a variety of places by a bright network of researchers, professionals and students and hosted by different Schools or research centres dealing with design for social innovation and sustainability. The Talks have always kept a spontaneous form as invitation seminars addressing a variety of themes. The Storytelling series, then, introduced new experimental formats for eliciting the discussion such as the video-statements, which provide contributions also from testimonials (designers or philosophers) that are not able to join the conversation in person. Therefore, we started to collect thoughts as digital videos and also documentation repertoires as tools for continuing the self-reflection experience with a process of open and continuous discussion. One of the main goals for the DESIS Philosophy Talks is to make all this material available to the large community of interest and to keep the tension between theory and practice using that footage as fragments of the “design for social innovation narratives” which we are contributing to build and co-generate.



DESIS Philosophy Talk Dublin, 2013



DESIS Philosophy Talk Eindhoven, March 2014



DESIS Philosophy Talk Milan, May 2014



DESIS Philosophy Talk Eindhoven Dutch Design Week, October 2014

**01 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Storytelling & Social innovation**

November 2013

Dublin, National College of Art and  
Design Dublin, Cumulus Conference

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, Elisa Bertolotti, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza

*with* Eleonore Nicolas, Ezio Manzini, Davide Pinardi, Mika 'Lumi' Tuomola, Francesca Valsecchi, Yongqi Lou, Anna Meroni, Sonia Matos

**02 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Designers Telling Stories**

March 2014

Eindhoven, DAE

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* David Hamers, Liesbeth Huybrechts, Sophie Krier, David Parkinson, Bas Raijmakers, Marja Seliger, Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin (Studio FormaFantasma)

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**03 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Designers Telling Stories and  
Making Meaning**

May 2014

Milan, Politecnico di Milano

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Luigi Ferrara, Davide Pinardi, David Parkinson, Walter Mattana, Elisabeth Sikiaridi & Johan Frans Vogelaar (Hybrid Space Lab), David Hamers, Joana Casaca Lemos, Valentina Anzoise, Nik Baerten

**04 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**A Conversation About Time**

October 2014

Eindhoven - DAE - Dutch Design Week

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Bas Nik Baerten, Pablo Calderón Salazar, Alastair Fuad-Luke, Michael Kaethler, Bas Raijmakers

05



**DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Pearl Diver, Designer as Storyteller**

June 2015

Milan - IED - Cumulus Conference

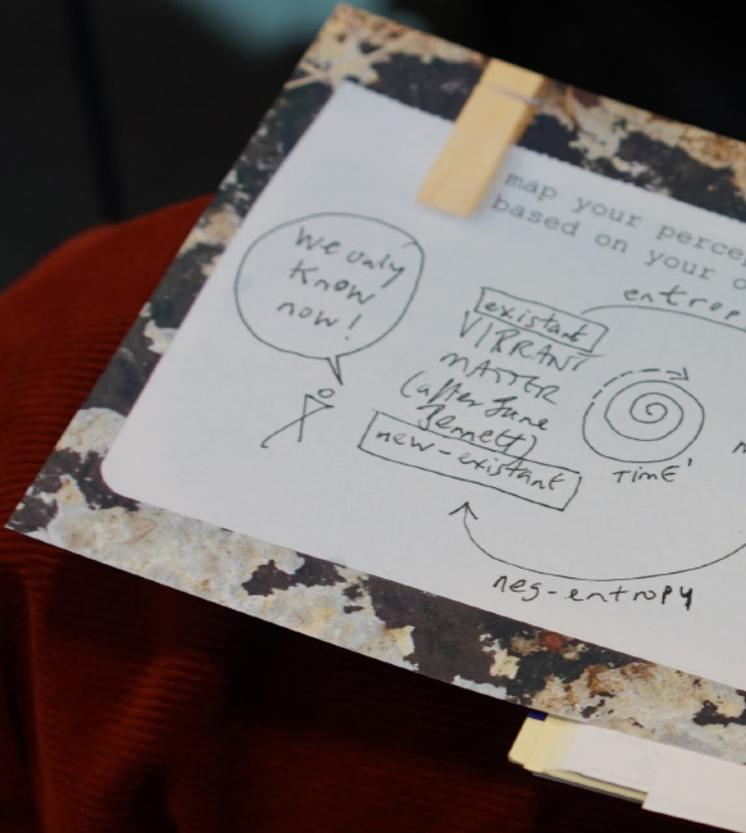
Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Francesca Antonacci, Valentina Anzoise, Sophie Krier, Donatella Mancini, Ilaria Mariani, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza, David Parkinson, Davide Pinardi, Daniel Anthony Rossi, Roberta Tassi, Francesca Valsecchi, Susan Yelavich

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...tion of time  
...wn practice

different  
VIBRANT  
MATTER

my

Note: Time ≡  
- astronomical  
- biological  
- organism  
- cellular  
- molecular  
- particle ≡ PHENOMENON  
- measurable Time

PLASTIC  
LUKE-Luke



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## About the Editors



## FOREWORD

### A conversation with Marisa Galbiati & Ezio Manzini

**Virginia Tassinari:** “First of all, I want to say thank you to both Marisa and Ezio for accepting our invitation to have a dialogue for our book<sup>1</sup>. I would like to start the conversation by asking what is your own, personal connection to this book and the initiative from which it originated?”

**Marisa Galbiati:** “I was invited to take part to the Philosophy Talks and to contribute to this book because I have personally dealt with audiovisual language and narration for a long time. When I was teaching at the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico di Milano my colleagues used to ask me: “What does cinema have to do with architecture?” Then, when I moved to the School of Design they started to ask me: “What does cinema have to do with design?” Essentially, what we did is to learn techniques and strategies from cinema, and to apply them to different fields. The world of audiovisual is hard, because you need to know about techniques, aesthetics, strategies, and you also have to put the different elements in sync. I believe that one mostly has to practice it in order to fully understand its multi-dimensional nature. To use a metaphor, this process of getting to know the audiovisual tools was for us like learning to sing: once you have learned it, you can use it for singing a modern tune, but you can also sing a traditional Neapolitan folk

song or an opera lyric. Speaking of possible fields of application for audiovisual storytelling, at some point we have had the opportunity to share experiences with colleagues working in the field of design for social innovation and we understood that we could do a lot of interesting things together, as each one could bring his own knowledge, technicalities and culture.”

**Ezio Manzini:** “Marisa refers to storytelling as filmmaking, which is a specific discipline. I think that what has happened throughout the years is that we have understood that storytelling can also be considered a design tool for telling complex stories and situations, which otherwise it would be too difficult to represent.”

“My personal experience is actually symmetrical to that of Marisa. It is since many years that I have been dealing with design for social innovation. From within this context we have become aware that researchers and students were more and more expected to build narratives without yet having the right tools. They have learned to tell stories because they felt it was important for their practices. It slowly became clear that storytelling was not something one could improvise because, as Marisa said, there are already existing tools, expertise and stories which one can gain in order to make storytelling a fully-fledged design practice.

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<sup>1</sup> This conversation was recorded on Friday 29th June 2015: Marisa Galbiati (Milan, Italy), Virginia Tassinari (Seraing, Belgium), Ezio Manzini (Milan, Italy)

Storytelling represents one of the different ways which one can develop design actions, especially when one collaborates or deals with different people. When storytelling is seen as a design tool, it provides the opportunity to tell stories of social innovation in an effective and clear way. It is a relevant issue for the DESIS Network and it has been largely discussed in the Storytelling series of the Philosophy Talks.”

“In my opinion, there are two aspects to focus on, two layers of the same matter. The first one is a comparison of experiences from which one can learn how to use storytelling in a better way. You can build on experiences of others because there are differences in the storytelling techniques used in the different experiences. The second aspect that is emerging, is the fact that telling stories is a powerful and sometimes dangerous weapon, as it introduces ethical matters connected to the topic of storytelling. As far as storytelling starts to be recognized in all respects as a design tool – especially for social innovation (and it really is a powerful tool if you can use it properly) – we started to understand that we also need to reflect on this tool. This book is an attempt to start this reflection.”

**MG:** ““I personally think that there’s still a lot of work to be done in this field, so that storytelling can become a tool that is able to move the innermost feelings of people and to elicit a change of perspectives in the world we live in.”

“I am familiar with the world of advertising and I can say that one of the most important issues there is that communication has to be strongly effective for eliciting change in people’s behaviours. It has to comply with all the requirements: finding the right insight, the target and the tone of voice need to be consistent with the proper strategy. In this case, communication becomes a very effective tool. For example, we applied the creative strategy’s model typical of commercials into the social communica-

tion field. Developing social campaigns means promoting social issues, ideas for changing habits and behaviours: for example, promoting sustainable mobility, organs donation or against food waste. In our practice we realized that one can use knowledge coming from other fields, such as elements of the communication strategy (how you can analyse the audience, which tone of voice you should use) and apply them to different subjects one is trying to promote. It slowly became evident for us that it is easier to work on a campaign for promoting tomato sauce than on one that encourages behaviour change, since people are quite resistant to changing their customs. If you are promoting safety on a construction yard or green preservation, you are essentially trying to talk directly to people and persuade them that their habits are damaging the environment and that it would be better if they would stop moving by car, wasting water, and so on. Changing habits is more difficult than creating the need for objects and products to be possessed. Yet, in this use of communication and storytelling for communicating social issues there is a longer lasting effect when compared to commercial products. To make people aware of environmental issues and to prompt virtuous behaviours which could bring common benefits to people and communities, takes a long time.”

“Because communication is commonly widespread nowadays, we are totally immersed in it. From within this bubble, it is really difficult to catch signals from the outside. We are often suffering from a communication bombing. What can you do in such a context for your voice to be heard? You have to find a way to be more interesting and less boring. I use to say to my students: “If I’m yawning only 15 seconds after the story has begun being told, this means that something is wrong with your way of communicating”. Social communication cannot be boring!”(...) “I have always being telling Ezio that the risk of telling the stories of social innovation is to be boring and grey! You will not convince me

to be more sustainable if you ask me to suffer. You have to show me that I can also get enjoyment from sustainable behaviours, and that there is no punishment for an unsustainable behaviour. If you share a sustainable approach with others, you can feel part of a community, and this can be rewarding.

If you take for instance the video of *Il Sabato della Bovisa*, one of the special initiatives linked to Coltivando<sup>2</sup>, the community garden in our campus. The video communicates happiness: you see students along the streets of the neighbourhood, talking to people at the market or the children playing and gardening in the campus. It communicates fun. It is joyful and vibrant. This is an important issue: it's about aesthetics. Dealing with communication, you should not make people feel guilty, otherwise they stop listening to you. How to reach this kind of aesthetic is difficult, of course, because it is a matter of sensitivity. There's no way to engineer aesthetics. Sensitivity comes from education, and understanding beauty through arts, cinema, and theatre.

**EM:** "This is certainly the journey that the whole environmental and sustainability cultures – myself and the people I've worked with over the years – have been doing throughout the years. In the beginning the key focus was facing current issues such as recycling matters or complex socio-environmental ones (the last being a still very current one). The focus was still very much on problem solving. Now, after so many years, we all have to treasure Marisa's advice. Now we can all agree on the need of positive narrations. Most of the people dealing with design for sustainability and social innovation gained an awareness that our task today is not only to provide a specific technical solution to the issues. What we need is to face the fact that there is a lack of big narratives, which can sum up many little experiences which might be meaningful at the local level, yet they need to be amplified. We need stories that can provide a common sense

and envision a future possible civilization, powering new ideas of prosperity and welfare which do not come from polluting products and waste, but from new qualities."

"I personally think and hope that this book can also help to separate the different levels of the discussion about storytelling. Mankind needs to build up his own story. Nowadays thousands of different voices are providing together what we might in the future retrospectively read as the story of a new civilization. Within the development of these (luckily enough) uncontrolled stories, there lays the contribution that each one of us can provide. There is also another level of storytelling: namely that of telling a story that can contribute to develop a more general vision. In this case it we can recognize social innovation not only for its capacity for problem solving (as it initially used to be), but also because it is able to create social and relational qualities. We therefore have to use positive examples in order to show and make people appreciate the different attitudes emerging, where one can recognize for instance ideas of time, place, people and work alternative to the way in which modernity used to refer to these concepts."

"There is also another kind of storytelling: scenario building. There, storytelling is a tool for design conversations and you need to show different possible solutions and it is my intention to offer them in their diversity, proposing their different – maybe opposing – features. In co-design processes it is important to provide good scenarios that are capable of delivering ideas in an efficient way. In my opinion, this kind of storytelling is a matter of design sensitivity and awareness. In this case the key issue is to design a variety of different contents which can guarantee food for thought."

"With these different uses for storytelling, it would be useful to have a kind of map of the different situations. In my opinion we should now discuss

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2 [www.coltivando.polimi.it](http://www.coltivando.polimi.it)

where we are currently, where the technical and economical problems are, which kind of investments are needed and which communication channels should we use for our communication goals.”

**MG:** “I think that storytelling has always been the engine for change. For sure, some stories can open your mind and raise questions that you maybe never thought about. They can make you look at reality from a different point of view.”

“Ezio was talking about scenarios and storytelling as a tool for dialogue. (...) In my opinion these are to be considered working tools. They are not supposed to be beautiful or well-made scenarios. For example, the masters of French cinema used the camera as if it were a pencil to take notes. They went around the city and filmed, at random, without too much technicality. Instead of taking notes in a notebook, they used the camera. We often do the same. Our goal is not to get a high-quality artifact from an aesthetic point of view, but a working tool. We are not professional film-makers. A new sensitivity is expanding, which is also due to the diffusion of technologies and the ability to use them. Nowadays you can do everything you want just by using your personal devices and mobile phone. A consequence to this is that the aesthetic quality is getting more “dirty”. Nevertheless, sometimes such an artefact works better than professional artifacts, as it can be more effective and direct.”

“The real problem I think is how to organize and make all these contributions and different forms of storytelling work together. We need to ensure that all these contributions don’t remain as atoms, and that we are given the possibility to find them. There must be a way to build a link that weaves the pieces like an embroidery and makes them available. Many elements and tools are available nowadays, but we need a narrative of narratives: we need a way for including every experience into an accessible system. Which role does storytelling

have in this picture? Linking storytelling to design is a brilliant intuition, as storytelling can be used in this context as a tool for building dialogues between different disciplines.”

**EM:** “Images are more communicative than words. This is the reason why storytelling has become so relevant to design for social innovation, as an instrument of co-design, participation, and of binding people together. The visualization of given concepts, the fact that telling stories by means of a visualization is as much of a design tool as a sketch, a prototype or a map is. To do so, you do not need to be a movie director. One should learn these tools at school, as you also learn to sketch. Design students should learn the basics for making a film: not for commercial reason, but using films as design tools.”



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