

ADVANCEMENTS IN DESIGN RESEARCH

11 PhD theses on Design as we do in POLIMI



edited by Lucia Rampino and Ilaria Mariani



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DESIGN INTERNATIONAL

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Contents

The evolving boundaries of design research at Polimi: education, soft skills, creative companies and digital tech

Lucia Rampino and Ilaria Mariani

pag. 9

We need new steps

Alessandro Biamonti

» 19

Perspectives in Design Education

Dialogues on the relationship between Spatial and Service Design

Annalinda De Rosa

» 25

Internationalizing the Fashion Design Curriculum: Nurturing Internationalized Talents

Xiaozhu Lin

» 39

Designing Knit Designers. Teaching tools and methods to train professionals for the knitwear industry

Martina Motta

» 53

Collaborative Processes Enabled by Design

Design as enabling agent.

Design culture and non-designers in the changing role of disciplines

Rūta Valušytė

pag. 77

Designing the empathic experience.

Suggestions from art practices

Alice Devecchi

» 89

Intermediate urban space.

Design and light art as catalysts for change: participation beyond fruition

Isa Helena Tibúrcio

» 103

Design for Cultural and Creative Companies

Handling the Complexity of Design Support Programmes. An interpretative framework for barriers and drivers to introducing design innovation into Brazilian MSMEs

Mariana Fonseca Braga and Francesco Zurlo

» 125

FashionTech: Interaction Across Boundaries. Integration practices for design-enhanced user experiences

Susanna Testa

» 141

Design and Technology for Social Change

A taxonomy of data visualization projects for alternative narratives

María de los Ángeles Briones R.

pag. 163

Studying digital images in groups: the folder of images

Gabriele Colombo

» 185

The Materials Generation

Camilo Ayala-Garcia and Valentina Rognoli

» 197

Designing the empathic experience. Suggestions from art practices

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“Carlo Bo”

Abstract

The emerging collaborative approaches to design require a rethinking of how empathy as a designer's skill to step into the other's shoes is traditionally considered. Empathy should be extended to participants who cooperate towards a common goal. A shift from considering empathy as an individual's psychological ability to experience supporting dialogic and cooperative relations could be a better fit for collaborative processes. In order to achieve this change of perspective, a theoretical framework has been built up from a phenomenological account of empathy, focused on empathy's nature of interpersonal experience, introducing others into one's own personal horizon and enabling the acknowledgment of otherness. Empathy may unfold spontaneously within relational contexts, while still requiring its facilitation and support in addition to contextual circumstances which simply do not prevent it from occurring.

Hence, this study aims to provide guidelines that support the design of particular conditions for enabling empathic experiences. The guidelines for designing the empathic experience have been drawn from a study of participatory and collaborative art practices, since they are associated with creating particular relational contexts in which empathic experiences are triggered. Art practices – immersive, collaborative and/or participatory – are analysed with the aim of understanding how they can suggest strategies to designers. This cross-disciplinary work channels philosophy and art into the current design discourse, in an attempt to translate theoretical reflections about empathy and our modes of experiencing those around us into practical suggestions for facilitating collaborative processes and managing the relational dynamics at stake therein.

Introduction

By unpacking the title of the study, its main scope clearly emerges, i.e. to provide tools for *designing* ‘situations’ that enable *an empathic experience*. To this end, *suggestions* have been drawn *from contemporary art practices*.

The study is framed within a broader research topic regarding the possibility of rethinking the relationship between art and design today. The reason for reconsidering this relationship is that both disciplines are similarly involved in a long-lasting transformation that has ‘dematerialized’ objects and products towards processes and practices.

«The initial model of design has gradually been redefined, with successive additions generated by the need to widen its field of application (from products to services to organizations), to embrace new actors (from experts in other disciplines to end users), and to change relationships with time (from close-ended to open-ended processes)» (Manzini, 2015, p. 53).

Moreover, the role of artists and designers is becoming that of facilitators, strategists, activists, social agents; while the audience and users are becoming participants and co-designers. In the words of Claire Bishop (2012, p. 2), «The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant».

Given this similar development in the transformation of art and design, the assumption from which the study stems is that art can provide design with strategies for developing processes, along with inspiring aesthetic solutions as it has always done.

Conceptual framework

It’s worth clarifying the art and design I considered in this research. On both sides, this work is focused on current practices that put at their center the process of doing, making, experiencing something together, working towards a common goal. In short, processes and practices in which the emphasis is on collaboration and the collective dimension of social experience. With regards to art, under the umbrella of “relational and participatory art” I considered contemporary *practices* (not artworks) based on audience’s participatory experience and/or bodily engagement in the production and/or in

the reception. In the realm of design, I focused my attention on collaborative design *processes* (not products) that rely on dialogic exchanges and cooperative attitudes for a successful development.

Namely, participatory and collaborative approaches and practices, such as *relational* and *collaborative services* (Cipolla and Manzini, 2009), projects by *creative communities* (Meroni, 2007), *dialogic art* (Kester, 2011), *immersive life practices* (Tucker, 2014), which are all increasingly dependent on relational exchanges. Involving many participants, sometimes even communities at large, and multiple stakeholders in complex dynamics of cooperation, they must rely on relational skills and oiled relationships for their unfolding.

In this respect, Richard Sennet argues that making something together in view of a common goal requires the craft of cooperation, that is essentially based on dialogic skills. «Cooperation [is] a craft», he states, and «It requires the skill of understanding and responding to one another in order to act together» (Sennet, 2012, p. X). He also connects empathy with dialogic skills, for empathy attends to another person on his or her own terms, without trying to erase or overcome differences. In his words «the dialogic conversation prospers through empathy, the sentiment of curiosity about who other people are in themselves» (p. 23).

Following this line of thought, the study has been conducted through the lens of empathy, today responsible for building a bridge between art and design, considering that it may constitute a common ground between participatory and collaborative approaches that have recently emerged and that rely on dialogic and cooperative skills.

However, when speaking about empathy the risk of being misunderstood is very high. Empathy has become a buzzword over the last decades, including in the design discourse, usually taken superficially as a ‘soft skill’ associated with the capacity of putting yourself in the shoes of another. This study took on the challenge of rethinking empathy in design disciplines, with the aim of questioning its role and interpretation within collaborative processes based on cooperation.

Empathy in design literature

In structuring the study, a literature review has been fundamental. It showed that even though the topic of empathy in design is not new, it has undergone a season of great interest in the last ten years (Cipolla and Bartolo, 2014; Devecchi and Guerrini, 2017; Dong *et al.*, 2018; French and Teal, 2016; Kouprie and Visser, 2009; Mattelmäki *et al.*, 2014; Mattelmäki, 2018),

also confirmed by the presence of many papers on the subject at a number of important design conferences¹.

Highlights from the literature review report a general concern for updating the traditional tools and methods of empathic design in order to tackle the growing complexity of design practice. Primarily, the issue of scaling empathy from designers to participants and stakeholders recurs within the reviewed material. Along with the need for reconsidering empathy's role and position within the design process.

Furthermore, while reviewing the literature, what stood out was the almost absent account of empathy as a relational experience, while prevailing a traditional perspective on empathy as the designer's skill to walk in the shoes of his/her user, as a useful tool for gaining a deeper understanding of his/her needs and wishes.

In a nutshell, out of the review came that empathy in design is shifting:

- from affecting the user-designer relationship, to a broader group of participants;
- from a self-referential act of the designer addressed to the end-users' understanding, to a soft skill to be scaled and sustained within organizations and companies;
- from the individual ability to be used when designing, to experience enabled by 'situations' designed in view of the aim;
- from an approach adopted at the early stages of the design process, to the process itself spreading along the whole design intervention.

Thus, what clearly emerges is the need to question the notion of empathy in design and to reconsider it in order to draw out a more suitable way of accounting for how it tackles the relational issues involved in a design processes based on collaboration.

Empathy and its complex substance

Reconsidering empathy means first of all recognizing its complexity, its multi-layered substance which goes far beyond the ability of walking in another person's shoes.

¹ To name just a few: Cumulus Conference - *Design for everything*, Hong Kong 2016; 12th EAD Conference – *Design for Next*, Rome 2017; ServDes Conference – *Proof of concept*, Milano 2018.

«Empathy is a laboratory of lived and intellectual experiences woven into interpersonal relationships and social bonds», writes Laura Boella, one of the most engaged scholars in rediscovering empathy (2018, p. 11). She also states that «Empathy is never just singularly one thing, rather it follows various paths. It changes depending on different subjects and contexts and intertwines with a variety of affective and cognitive processes»² (p. 62).

The complexity of the notion of empathy is also due to its long history. Empathy finds its origin in *Einfühlung*, the German word meaning ‘feeling into’ used in the XIX Century philosophic tradition of Aesthetics to describe the way in which humans perceive objects (in particular artworks) projecting themselves into them. When Theodor Lipps extended the use of *Einfühlung* to the problem of consciousness of other minds, the concept of empathy (and the word, translated into English in 1909) made its way into psychology, phenomenology and – more recently – social neurosciences.

In order to provide the work with a theoretical background, the study explored the concept of empathy – especially its phenomenological account – in an attempt to return its complexity and bring it into the design discourse.

Empathy as a skill vs empathy as an experience

The typical concept of empathy as a skill, performed by designers for gaining insight into users’ needs, is proving to be unsuitable for handling the complexity of emerging collaborative approaches. On the other hand, empathy as a relational experience which enables the discovery of the other and his/her otherness, may be crucial in supporting collaborative processes that rely on cooperation and dialogic skills.

For shifting to such an experiential account of empathy the study called on an examination of the phenomenological tradition, with a particular focus on Edith Stein’s doctoral dissertation *The problem of empathy* (1917)³ and its recent interpretation by philosophers such as Dan Zahavi and Laura Boella, among others (Boella, 2006; 2018; Zahavi, 2010; 2014). According to the Steinian account, empathy is an intersubjective process in which two subjects connect and come to know each other, keeping their identity well separated. There is no identification, nor blurring of one’s self and the other. Rather, the discovery and acknowledgment of the other’s alterity.

² Translated into English by the author.

³ Consulted: Stein, W. (1921) *On the Problem of Empathy* (W. Stein, Trans.), Washington D.C.: ICS Publications.

Instead, in empathic design, and in design disciplines in general, empathy is usually understood in its psychological sense, which identifies the ability of taking the perspective of another person, thus walking in his/her shoes, overcoming differences towards a complete identification which allows a deep understanding of the other. Such a skill is considered innate, yet also learned. It can be enhanced and improved by specific exercises and techniques, which in fact are strongly suggested to empathic designers in order for them to better understand those for whom they are designing.

By contrast, empathy as an experience does not depend on an individual's attitude or training, rather it is built on the connection between a self and another established within a face-to-face encounter. It allows the discovery and acknowledgment of the other's existence in his/her terms, paving the road to deeper relational exchanges. As an experience, empathy may be enabled. This could mean that it may be possible to set the right conditions for it to occur, as to facilitate and support dialogic encounters and cooperative relationships.

Given that the experience of empathy may be enabled, and that experiencing empathy may have a positive impact on relational dynamics at stake in collaborative processes, the study's endeavour has been to understand how design might enable such an experience.

Enabling the experience of empathy

The second part of the study has been focused on answering this question, by means of the analysis of case studies aimed at exploring the possibilities of enabling an empathic experience.

At this point, I will take a step back to the assumption stressed in the introduction regarding the role of art practices in suggesting strategies for developing design processes. Thus, the study will seek among contemporary art practices a number of examples of empathic processes, deemed to be fitting with the phenomenological interpretation of empathy. Six case studies among immersive, participatory and/or collaborative practices, have been analysed by applying the theoretical framework of empathy as experience of the other, embodied, relational and multi-layered.

Art practices selected as case studies:

- belong to the 'crossover zone' (Perelli, 2017) between artistic, social, psychological and perceptual experiments, activists' initiatives and public events, which characterizes the landscape of contemporary art today;

- have been chosen within a timeframe going from pioneering participatory artworks to contemporary practices which have inherited an open-ended approach;
- set up “situations” in which embodied encounters happen and participants are asked to do something together;
- address a kind of experience which raises awareness of human interconnection and otherness as values;
- require somatic engagement, both mental and bodily.

The methodology for approaching such case studies included a preliminary desk research phase based on literature and personal observation from an historical-critical perspective. Subsequently, in order to verify that each case study was consistent with the main theoretical framework regarding the empathic experience, I sought to identify the conditions that in each case could be responsible for the empathic experience unfolding. There is room here to discuss just two of the six cases studied, and give an idea of the work involved.

Suggestions from art practices. 2 examples

On Space Time Foam – by Tomás Saraceno – has been showcased in 2012 at Hangar Bicocca in Milan. The installation is made of three layers of transparent membranes floating 20 metres above ground level. People walk on the membranes which are inflated with varying amounts of pressure between one and the other. At maximum inflation the membranes take the shape of a dome, with steep walls to climb. When someone on the ground level enters or exits the installation, the amount of pressure changes and the dome shape collapses. The transparent floor bends under people’s feet and continuously changes shape in relation to people’s movement. As the walls get steeper, people are required to coordinate their movements and their mutual spatial relations in order to gain control over the space.

As established in the methodologic approach, after the preliminary study of the artistic intervention, I assessed its consistency with regards to the features characterizing the empathic experience.

Out of the assessment came that *On Space Time Foam* could be read as a model of empathic experience for the following reasons:

- it generates an embodied relational experience;
- participants are immersed in a space together with strangers who they must reach out to and interact with;

- its effect depends on the presence of at least two people. One single person is not enough to trigger the transformation of the surrounding environment; it is essential to have at least one person on the membranes and one down on the ground in order to activate the difference of pressure;
- the experience provided by the installation can be considered an immediate experience, in the sense that it happens there-and-then, without any mediation, and in strong relation with the context set up;
- it addresses a somatic perception. It calls perceptual certainties into question. By walking upon a floating floor our kinaesthetic dimension is highly stimulated and required to intervene;
- the particular experience makes the interdependence of people's actions tangible. Each individual movement corresponds to a reaction of the whole environment. One portion of the floor goes down and another goes up, according to people's movement;
- to experience *On Space Time Foam* is very demanding in terms of active personal engagement. Although it sounds like a playful game, participants must be in the right disposition to collaborate in order to overcome such a challenging situation.

Another case study has been *Green Light* – by Olafur Eliasson (2016-on-going) – which shares some similarities with Saraceno's work with respect to the experience evoked in its attendees. *Green Light* consists of two interventions: a workshop engaging migrants in assembling modular lamps made from sustainable and recycled materials; and a parallel *Shared Learning Programme* providing migrants with an educational curriculum. It embraces forms of learning that create a multi-relational and collaborative processes of exchange. Activities include weekly theater gatherings, film screenings, seminars and workshops held by visiting artists; daily language classes, vocational training, legal consultancy, job training and psychological counselling. The author, Olafur Eliasson states his goals as follows: «How does one proceed from the assembly of a light module to social change? The journey might seem long and convoluted, yet a simple but crucial step is to trust the potential in the non-spectacular situation of sitting down together and doing something basic with our hands. [...] What emerges during these activities is a shared social space [and] a feeling of interconnectedness» (Eliasson, 2017, p. 14).

Once again, I assessed whether the *Green Light* experience might be considered one of an empathic kind:

- Participants are involved in the collaborative process of producing a tangible output, and to achieve this goal they are asked to engage in embodied interpersonal interactions, *Green Light* is *de facto* an embodied relational experience;
- Even though the project hosts up to forty participants, in assembling the elements of the lamp attendees are often paired up when working on a specific task;
- Participants are involved at different levels in an immersive experience. Hence, *Green Light* “talks” immediately – i.e. without any mediation – to its attendees;
- A somatic perception is called upon, or rather a somatic engagement, for instance with regards to the communication between people of different languages, which requires gestures and body language;
- From assembling lamps together, sharing food, learning from one another and with others, comes a deep sense of interpersonal connection.
- By activating a “we-mode” – according to which we are, metaphorically speaking, modules that, despite looking all the same, once recombined give shape to something else (Roepstorff, 2017) – *Green Light* achieves the goal of enhancing the interdependence of people’s actions.
- It is a very demanding experience in terms of active personal engagement, mostly for refugees and asylum seekers, but also for locals and volunteers who decide to get involved in the project.

Once the conditions enabling the empathic experience in each of the 6 case studies had been identified, I collected the recurring elements and theorized a system of so-called *enablers* of the empathic experience. A survey among participants at the case studies contributed to gathering their opinions about the experience they had been through and what condition they acknowledged as enabling it. By matching the case studies and the survey’s results, I deduced the 9 *enablers* of the empathic experience. Each *enabler* identifies a particular circumstance that may be acknowledged as triggering an experience of empathy. The *enablers* can be contextual, meaning that the context is set up with particular spatial and temporal conditions which favour bodily immersion into the proposed activity; and/or relational, meaning that the relational dynamics among participants are driven in a particular direction by intervening beforehand, by, for example, determining the number of participants, their previous relationships or their life circumstances (tab. 1).

Tab. 1 – The enablers of the empathic experience.

Art box	Contextual	The artistic context is usually perceived as a neutral zone with particular rules exiting from socio-economic constraints. Outside of the prejudices affecting everyday activities, participants are keen to establish equal interactions.
Tricky space	Contextual	The space may be set up with perceptual tricks that force participants to renegotiate their relationship with the surrounding environment, thus enhancing their awareness of the basic body-space connection.
Bracketing place	Contextual	A place ‘put in brackets’ is a neutral concrete space allowing particular ways of being together. It is a place where relationships are not yet commodified.
Suspended time	Contextual	A fracture in the ordinary unfolding of a typical day, allows for a moment of undivided attention, an attitude to listen and connect to the other.
Body to body	Relational	A basic condition for empathy is the interpersonal encounter. ‘Body to body’ stands as a pre-condition among the other enablers. It is a <i>conditio sine qua non</i> .
In your shoes	Relational	A situation in which participants are asked to switch their roles with someone else. The reversal of usual roles facilitates a change in one’s own perspective.
Common goal	Relational	Having a concrete objective to achieve together, puts participants in the condition of establishing a dialogue with others, and horizontal relations based on trust, openness and mutual help.
Foreign face	Relational	the different identity, socio-cultural background, and geographical provenance may convey otherness and diversity as valuable assets
In the same boat	Relational	Sharing a particular circumstance, be it negative or positive, enhances the feeling of togetherness. When we are ‘all in the same boat’ we are keener to acknowledge the other as someone very similar to us and feel in tune with him/her.

Results. Towards guidelines for designing the empathic experience

The last part of the study has been focused on interweaving theoretical reflections to formulate practical tools, in an effort to translate theory into practice.

A first step was a workshop I held at the Universidade de Aveiro⁴ aimed at discussing the proposed *enablers*. I invited 5 PhD researchers interested in design for social innovation, user experience and service design in order to figure out scenarios for the *enablers*' application within design processes. The agenda of the workshop included a presentation of the case studies and the *enablers*. Afterwards, participants discussed them and provided suggestions. They also worked on a double diamond model in order to identify the phases of the design process which are more likely to host a designed empathic experience and to what aim (Devecchi, 2017).

The outcome of the whole research process took the shape of a set of guidelines for designing the empathic experience, intended to help designers in developing, preparing and handling collaborative processes. As the word itself says, *guidelines* are intended to guide and in no way restrict. They are not rules. Rather they shall act as suggestions to design the best conditions for initiating the experience of empathy. In this respect, one must consider that, as in every experience, empathy may occur or it may not, depending on several factors, mainly related to one's own approach and sensitivity. However, when empathy unfolds, it may pave the path to dialogic relationships and cooperative attitudes, thus improving and fostering processes that rely on such relational dynamics.

Conclusion

The research journey started with reconsidering empathy's meaning and role in design, making it more suitable to emerging design practices. I considered that moving towards a phenomenological account of empathy as an experience of discovering the other and his/her alterity, may be an answer to the increasing need of managing the relational dynamics at stake in collaborative processes.

The journey went on to draw on collaborative/participatory art practices in order to isolate useful suggestions in view of strategies for enabling an

⁴ *Design for Empathy. A workshop*, Universidade de Aveiro, 4/07/2017.

empathic experience. In this respect I considered that «the arts and cultural projects in particular can create a level playing field to allow persons of different cultural backgrounds to interact, learn and experience on a par with each other» (European Agenda for Culture, 2017, p. 15).

The research journey ended up with the translation of these suggestions into a flexible set of guidelines aimed at structuring the best conditions for the experience of empathy to occur through collaborative processes.

It may seem to be a paradox, since empathy of course cannot be designed itself. In fact it is instead just enabled. What a designer can do is set the stage and be sure he/she is not impeding its unfolding.

The conclusions of the present study are open, in the sense that they call for a great potential of further development and discussion.

Weaving philosophy with theory and history of art into the design discourse is quite a novel approach and could be further discussed in a design arena in order to collect other opinions and feedback. It's even more important to question the practical outcome of the study – the guidelines – and to experiment its use in real collaborative design processes.

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