The Rule and the Imprint

The role of the handmade within contemporary graphic design processes

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Abstract: This paper presents the case study of an experimental graphic design workshop held at the Design Faculty of The Politecnico di Milano in 2008 and 2009, focusing on the role of craft-based techniques within the contemporary graphic process.

Digital technology has in fact two opposite and yet intertwined effects on contemporary attitude towards the handmade. As a general rule, it seems to be progressively substituting all previous graphic techniques, locking craft out of the design area. On the other hand, digital devices provide designers with a flexible platform for technical crossbreeding. This last effect turns into an opportunity for designers to redefine the role of craft-based techniques within personalized processes.

Focusing on the 'imprint' pattern [5] and embracing a '*bricolage*' approach to traditional techniques, this paper argues how craft-based procedures can provide the computer-aided design process with a heuristic tool for visual investigation.

Key words: graphic design, design process, handmade and craft-based techniques, heuristic tools.

1. Introduction: constellations of craft and technology

Digital technologies radically changed graphic design practice, generally substituting the whole previous repertoire of techniques. In spite of this, for the last decade the potential of manual tools, craft-based techniques and old equipment has been increasingly reassessed as a key element in personalized creative processes. As early as 1998 Bruce Mau's was inviting designers of all kinds to question the technological mainstream in respect to creativity: 'Make your own tools', 'Great liberty exists when we avoid trying to run with the technological pack' [17]. In the field of graphic design, a growing number of publications about 'handmade', 'tactile' or 'craft' features in visual communication [see for example 2, 7, 9, 10, 12, 18] testify a cutting-edge scene emerging among practitioners. Three main relevant features make this trend worth investigating beyond what, at a first glance, could be read as a fashionable revival after the 1990's digital enchantment:

- Digital environment changes our point of view and determines new ways of interpreting and using craft-based techniques. Actually, the way we address the timeless dimension of the 'handmade' is always changing in dialogue with current technology. 'Low-tech' itself is a blurring category, which finds a meaning only in comparison with an ever evolving 'high-tech'.

- Designers who integrate craft-based techniques within their toolkit create 'constellations' of craft and technology. They blend and match different procedures in non-linear, flexible processes which are not counted by any of the single elements that compose them. Such practices are unlikely to be described as 'methods': they are rather spontaneous, everyday tactics deviating from the standard use of tools, similar to the users' tricks investigated by de Certeau [3].

- The integration of 'odds and ends' of craft into design practice is interestingly coherent with the contemporary cultural debate. Concepts as 'analogous' and 'bricolage' are widely accepted on a metaphorical level but rather ignored as practical means of design. Far from being the mainstream approach to visual design, crossbreeding toolkits venture into an escape from what de Certeau called the "odd chiasm" between theory and technology, the former going towards the indeterminate while the latter keeps on defending its rational functionalism from interferences and ambiguity [3, pp.291-293].

2. Beyond metaphor: putting analogous and *bricolage* into graphic practice

A discourse about 'analogous' and 'digital' tools requires considering the theoretical landscape behind such terms. Otl Aicher's philosophical essays on design [1] revaluated the 'analogous' physical experience and perception versus the predominance of 'digital' that is abstract and rational thought. His statements were consistent with a wider reflection on the very nature of design activity, which from the 1960's onwards turned from analytical, scientific methods moving towards a new definition as a 'reflective conversation' with the situation at hand [21]. Gradually taking distance from engineers' approach, designers discovered in Lévi-Strauss' *bricolage* theory [14] a suitable anthropological pattern concerning their fundamental skill of dealing with their material inventory and the contingency of events rather than with abstract concepts and rules.

Design theory accepted *bricolage* mainly as a metaphorical attitude. Louridas [15] distinguishes between the literal *bricolage* of pre-modern 'unselfconscious' or 'craft' design, and the metaphorical one of modern 'selfconscious' design. The latter, according to Lawson [13, pp. 31-32], is also told 'design-by-drawing' that is working not directly on the artefact but on models and drawings. Nevertheless, such distinction does not seem considering the hybrid processes by which some contemporary designers are taking back the making to explore the 'uncertain world of translating ideas into matter' [19, 20]. In the field of graphic design, the boundaries between an artefact and its model are easily leapt over. They are actually fuzzy: steps may blur, merge and reverse. Does graphic design make room for Aicher's philosophy and *bricolage* also on a literal level? A blend of manual and digital tools would provide a practical means of integrating within the design process the 'analogous' and the 'digital', the skills of both the *bricoleur* and the 'engineer'.

3. The imprint's charm

Rather than hand drawing, the 'allure of the handmade' [10] that fascinates contemporary graphic designers concerns techniques such as letterpress, printmaking, silkscreen printing or photography. Such media are the focus of a research conducted by Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London, named the Codex Project. The project stated that handmade printing techniques 'are of direct relevance to the teaching of computer aided design' because of their capability to encourage 'play and creativity through interaction with the medium'. Printing techniques involve a playful interaction through physical contact, which radically differs from

the one we experience on digital interfaces. It is in contrast with digital predictability that David Jury's insight on the 'heart of letterpress' can be fully understood:

'The process requires constant reappraisal, suggesting improvisations, deviations, even irregularities, and continually offering fresh and unexpected alternatives to form and pattern, colour and texture. Such variations are, in fact, slight and subtle. (…). It is part of the unavoidable contrast and tension – between regulation and freedom, uniformity and divergence – that is at the heart of letterpress.' [10].

Designers thus use craft-based techniques to test unexpected variations of 'form and pattern, colour and texture' beyond a previously drawn planning. Where software removes material interferences and virtually foster a total control over the outcome, craft-based techniques provide graphic design process with an open-ended experimental field. Such practice reminds us of the timeless technical archetype of 'imprint' as described by Didi-Huberman [5]. This is not surprising: if 'imprint' means a direct physical transference of a form from one surface or material to another, as a technical pattern it includes the very essence of all printmaking processes, as well as other analogous visual techniques such as moulding, stamping, stencilling or photogram. An 'imprint' process is heuristic since it is never totally predictable, due to its inherent technical impurity that involves slight and complex variations of gesture, material and substrate. Techniques once used as reliable means of reproduction survive in the computer era because designers are able to exploit their technical 'weaknesses' and play with them. The contemporary use of craft-based techniques discloses a 'craft design' survival besides the 'design-by-drawing' approach to graphic design. Indeed, Didi-Huberman traces the presence of imprint in art history as the hidden counterpart of drawing in occidental visual culture. Renaissance established the rule of both fine arts and engineering idealized activities, in which drawing is the purest way to make visible concepts and inner visions. Imprint procedures, instead, belong to the opaque craft process of making resisting the rationality's enlightenment. The intrinsic value of the 'process of making' has been one of the main statements of the 20th Century avant-garde, after centuries in which 'with meticulous care the painters eliminated all signs of the making' [11, pp. 186-196]. Visual artists used explicit imprint procedures as means to break previous visual conventions. Today technology has changed designers' inventory again, cleaning most imprints off the desk. Moreover, the promotional rhetoric about digital tools' creative features often disguises the recovering of a conservative concept of representation based on control and self-expression [16]. The reassessment of craft-based techniques in contemporary design must be seen in continuity with avant-gardes' experiments as well as in contrast with a return of a control-through-drawing prejudice supported by standard software.

4. The imprint workshop

The workshop presented was held in two editions (2008 and 2009) by professors Giovanni Baule and Daniela Calabi at the Design Faculty of the Politecnico di Milano. Each edition consisted of about 15 sessions during a semester and involved a group of about 60 first year's students of the Graphic Communication course. The design of the workshop program was tightly connected with the prior findings of the presented PhD research. Conceived as a work in progress, the workshop tested prototype tools and formats in a constant dialogue with students. Individual conversation on projects and group interviews supported by graphic tools (i.e. sketches) were the means employed to evaluate students' response. We paid special attention to students' conception of graphic design tool-kit.

Focus group pointed out that students scarcely knew or considered any other graphic design tool but pencil, camera and computer. Their 'self-portraits at work' reflect a widespread abstract conception of creativity, like 'a flash of inspiration' or 'a way of looking at things'. First year students indeed tend to overvalue the 'creative idea' taking the process of making for granted. They are inclined to use quite passively software default elements (fonts, effects, etc.) and to mistrust non-standard processes. On the other hand, interviews at the beginning of the course revealed that many of them hoped to learn 'seeing things from a new point of view' and to 'experiment new materials'.

As we did not have any printmaking equipment available, we combined craft-based elements and do-it-yourself tools to form playful and accessible experimental procedures emphasizing the imprint heuristic pattern. Our main objectives were:

- to enhance an investigative, open-ended attitude throughout the graphic process;
- to make students question preconceived boundaries between professional and non-professional tools;
- to make students focus on the sensorial qualities of marks as an essential feature of visual language.

The brief was to design a system of marks related to the urban territory of the University neighbourhood. The workshop unfolded throughout the following steps:

- We began turning over the conventional project planning (analysis, conceptualization, representation). Students were invited to take clay imprints of accidental marks on urban surfaces by means of simple handmade tools they had to make themselves. Imprints collected were printed as stamps, giving a pattern book of marks. By introducing a strong accidental element at the very beginning of the project, students were faced with a sort of 'catastrophe' to deal with, similar to Deleuze's 'analogous diagram' that breaks pictorial clichés and determines new visual possibilities [4, pp. 113-137 and 157-164].

- Next steps focused on the ever-evolving nature of form, the processing of which was explored on a double track: digital editing by vectorial software and manipulation by further imprint techniques, such as stencilling and casting of rubber stamps.

- Students made their own original toolkit to design with: a basic vectorial 'alphabet' and a physical set of stamps made of different materials. They mixed such tools seamlessly in a range of exercises with textures, perceptive effects and animation. Students were requested to preserve all the parts of the process and to organize them in a kit they had to present at the end of the course.

The main difficulty has been to make students leave aside their outcome-oriented approach to focus on an open-ended process investigation, a problem that has been naturally overcome as the workshop began to give brilliant visual results. Students experienced that physical interaction with materials may lead to unexpected visual findings, which can be easily integrate in computer-aided process. Many of them agreed that the experience enhanced their sensibility to material details and imperfection as a means of design, or that they learn to make room for open-ended deviations within the process. Most of all, the dialogue we fostered during the workshop managed to raise some critical issues among students, making them question the conventional boundaries of 'proper' design method and tools. In 2010 this workshop will develop in its third edition, seeking for new briefs and diverse environmental challenges, while confirming the same objective: to fill the gap between the 'flash of inspiration' and a passive acceptance of default software options by giving students resources to investigate and develop their own process of making.

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