

DESIGN WITHOUT PRODUCTS

One of the factors shared by contemporary designers is a focus on communication strategies. Basically, this implies the a priori choice of a message to convey: news about the latest product? New research conducted on processes? Or an overall design philosophy, in the wider sense of the term?

Storytelling takes up more room than ever today, and the split between project/product and communication can no longer exist. The most radical formula is that of designers who reach the point of using narration above and beyond the product itself. 'Extreme' storytelling does not make reference to a specific project, and the story itself becomes the focal point, with greater impact to convey thought rather than just an object ready to be distributed and consumed.

Antonio Aricò recently came up with the story of Nirù, a Calabrian puppet made by his grandfather, based on his design. A rural, traditional, ancient object, "a Moor who is not a warrior, but holds an olive branch," as the author puts it. The accompanying text is pithy, almost a Mediterranean haiku, a few words to convey an image, a vision, an intention. A video is being prepared, a sort of documentary on the tone of Aricò's project, to supplement the story of this ancestral fetish. All this very effectively addresses the universe of reference of Antonio, the spirit of the things he is expressing in his projects with increasing clarity, also in works for industry, when the companies are willing to take that direction.

Mario Trimarchi, a designer who works constantly with industry, also chooses in many cases to narrate his perspective through drawings that are windows on his world, or writings that apparently have nothing to do with the news of a product, and instead express the motivations of design itself.

From Le Corbusier to the Eameses, many **designers** in the past have relied on writings, drawings and videos to **narrate** their own **universe of imagery**. An attitude that resurfaces today through various **modes of communication**.

by Domitilla Dardi

Mario Trimarchi, "Dancing Architecture," drawing in ink and colored pencil on cotton paper, 2018



Alessandro Mendini, drawing
for "Diavoli custodi," Feltrinelli, Milan, 2018.
The drawing is part of a book written
by Eni De Luca and illustrated by Mendini.
The designer and the poet engage
in a long-distance dialogue through the shared
inner world of monsters that embody fears,
analyzed and exorcized, transformed
into constant, almost friendly presences.



The media may evolve, but the fact of the matter is that many designers in the more or less recent past have turned to narration without products to talk about their creative universe. All of them have been great inventors of new linguistic codes and modes of communication.

In 1924 Le Corbusier, in *The Decorative Art of Today*, literally murdered the idea of applied art, taking the side of design through support of industrial productions ranging from bidets to tavern glasses, without ever mentioning a single project or product (still a far cry from what could be deployed on the market).

Among the great experts of productless storytelling, the Eameses worked with IBM to create documentaries and exhibitions without ever making reference to a computer. Their film "Powers of Ten," for example, is a tribute to scales of magnitude from cosmic infinity to the smallest detected particles of matter: a theme well-suited to computerized intelligence that effectively displays its power of application in a much more evocative way that could be achieved in the presentation of the latest "business machine." Also when Bruno Munari explained his design method, he invented the analogy with cooking recipes, without ever mentioning even one of his great successes. The description of the creative process through a popular, common language like that of the preparation of spinach risotto was a genuine touch of brilliance through which to convey the passages of technical know-how to the masses, and no longer just to sector professionals. Another intuition of Munari was the creation of the "anonymous Compasso d'Oro award" as a way of narrating, where the product is always that of others, though the design vision is 100% Munari.

Pure writing has also been an extraordinary medium for many designers. One, in particular, is Sottsass with his "ceramics of darkness," where he narrated ancient worlds and pottery practices, mixed with the lives and history of men. Besides words, extreme storytelling makes use of images, especially those of handmade drawings. Here we could write an entire history of productless design, made of sketches, true paths of special access to that thrill of the mind that flows from the hand and then lingers on paper. Examples that come to mind - among the most recent - include the watercolors of the Bouroullec





Antonio Aricò, Niru, 2018

The designer from Calabria creates a puppet in ebony, fabric and brass, crafted by his grandfather. It is definitely not a product, but a symbolic fetish that represents the roots and sense of belonging of its maker. Niru is also a way of thinking about the traditional styles of the Mediterranean and our relationship with the 'others' who come from across the sea.

brothers, drawn to capture an idea or just to channel the design compulsion through a constant practice. The video that accompanies these drawings shows a hand that like a natural plotter traces the design encephalogram that almost seems like a mantra. Or a way of distilling an idea over time, which only in certain cases will germinate and become a product. For Alessandro Mendini drawings are clearly a sort of therapy, where he uses his monsters to exorcise that which, together with the poet Erri De Luca, have recently been called "guardian devils." When it comes to storytelling through objects, however, perhaps we can all learn something from Emilie Muller, the protagonist of a brilliant short by the director Yvon Marciano (1995). The tale is about an audition for a part in a film, and Emilie is one of the candidates for the role. The

director asks her to improvise a monologue starting with the description of the contents of a handbag on a coatrack behind her. The actress tells stories that start from a ring, an airplane ticket, a newspaper and other things, with plenty of detail: each object becomes a pretext for a narrative that opens up contexts, situations, relations. Towards the end, the young woman is dismissed with the classic "don't call us, we'll call you," but then she is chased down by the director after he discovers that the handbag was not actually hers, but that of a production assistant. Maybe all those who tell stories about objects should learn something from that young woman who displays her storytelling talents through the contents of someone else's handbag. Because in the end every story is an invention, a work of fiction, and above all a way to talk about what we see. ■

