Teaching anthropology with and to designers: notes from the field

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Abstract

This article discusses the Author's experience of teaching anthropology to and with designers at a Design faculty. Through the illustration of mutual false expectations and productive frictions, the article illustrates the progressive development of a methodology to teach anthropology to designers and to collaborate across disciplines. In so doing, the article also identifies the peculiarities of the 'anthropological approach' by emphasizing the importance of cross-scale interactions in the analysis of phenomena and the role of theory in making ethnography and, therefore, in supporting designers to make their work. The main argument is that theory and practice are not dichotomous, rather they are co-implicated because theoretical innovation is at the basis for design practices. The article concludes explicating the ways in which anthropology can be useful to design students, even if in forms that are different from those usually expected or imagined.

Keywords: design; anthropology; teaching; ethnography; interdisciplinarity

Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a bourgeoning of anthropological study of design, in dialogue with designers (Clarke 2017, Gunn and Donovan 2016, Gunn et al. 2013). Keith Murphy, in a recent review of the literature asks "why design, and why design now?" (2016, p. 443). His answer is that the attention of anthropology for design coincides with an enhanced sensitivity toward the study of processes rather than the study of entities (these understood as given-for-granted and bounded facts of reality). In this shift, refocusing from "the social world as it exists" to "the conditions of its making" through the study of design practices allows, according to Murphy, to address the role played by both of humans and non-humans (materials, objects, etc...) in creating social worlds (see, for example Ingold 2013) but also to account for the expanding presence of technology in people's lives

(Pink et al. 2016). Bruno Latour has observed that design is one of the disciplines best equipped to face the impending ecological crises because instead of aspiring to create things *ex-nihlo* design tinkers with things that already exist. There is always "something remedial in design" (Latour 2009, p. 5) and instead of imposing 'scientific truths' or grand narratives of modernity over nature, designers are "precautionary Prometheus(es)".

Surely, design and anthropology share an interest in exploring the tension between 'nature' and 'culture' but two more reasons, according to me, explain design' popularity among anthropologists. One derives from the 'reflective turn' of the '80s, inquiring into the ways anthropologists get to know things. Some Authors (Rabinow et al. 2008) have taken design as the model, given its experimental and collective (the studio as the stereotype of design working practices) and for its future-looking orientation[1]. The second reason is connected to the precarity that is eating up positions and job opportunities within an ever-increasingly neoliberalized academia (Loher et al. 2019) that prizes 'impact' understood as short-term, economic and visible results. In this context, for many young (and less young) anthropologists, to turn to business sectors such as design is often an option.

On the other hand, designers have expressed increasing interest for anthropology too (Miller 2018, Squires and Byrne 2002). Its methodology (ethnography), in particular, has been taken as inspiration from designers with very different agendas. In the '60-70s, for example, anthropology was embraced by the Italian design counterculture (see Rossi 2014) and since the '80s by companies such as Xerox Parc (Suchman 2013) and IDEO (Brown 2009) in order to accelerate innovation (Balsamo 2011) and understand users' needs and tastes.

Within the broad wave of anthropological interest for design, three approaches can be distinguished (Murphy 2016): "anthropology of design" (anthropological reflections about design objects), "anthropology for design" (anthropology providing a method of research) and "design for anthropology" (design taken as inspiration for collective tinkering). With this article, my aim is to think through these three approaches (especially the first two) through the lens of a fourth approach: 'anthropology *with* design', derived by my experience of teaching anthropology with and to designers. While the literature of anthropologists working with designers and vice versa is quite developed, little has been written about the experience of teaching anthropology to designers and, even less, of teaching anthropology with designers (for well-articulated exceptions see Dourish 2014, Gunn

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1   There is an increasingly call for anthropology to be future-oriented instead than past or present-looking (Appadurai 2013, Salazar et al. 2017). While I think is valuable to emphasize the contribution that anthropology can give to envisage the future, it is important to note that looking at the past or the present has always been the way to build the future.

2008, Tunstall 2013). In the article I will analyse how design objects and method can be reconfigured after encountering anthropology but also how anthropology can be thought not just as a critique of something but also an intervention in contemporary practices. I will illustrate the many things I have learned from design colleagues and students, especially through the false expectations and productive "frictions"[2] (Tsing 2004) arising from our interactions.

The setting

In the autumn of 2016, I took a last-minute call for teaching anthropology at the bachelor design program of the Faculty of Design and Art of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and I was assigned to the 'Projects'. I was assigned to 'Product Design', projects where students *make* things. Apparently, it is very different from anthropology that, rather, appears to be a *discourse* on something. But, as I will illustrate in the article, the distance between design and anthropology – and theory *vs* practice – proved to be far from true.

Projects are courses during which students have to develop their own project idea with the guidance of three professors. Every semester there is a project theme[3], which is a meaningful but flexible template for students. Projects are coordinated by a leader with a specific (product design, communication design etc...) and he/she collaborates with two other professors. One, beyond assisting in organization, gives specific guidance on the design process and methods (for example, digital modelling or materials) and the other integrate with the 'theory' part. This interdisciplinary format is quite innovative and has been allowed by the relative freedom enjoyed by Bolzano University as part of an autonomous province with strong connections with German speaking countries. The Faculty has been funded in 2002 by Kuno Prey, a designer from South-Tyrol who previously taught at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. At Weimar design and social sciences were much integrated and Prey tried to implement in Bolzano this model. Interdisciplinarity, however, is not such an easy task. It needs support and may lead into different directions.

In Bolzano, for example, students have an initial training in design but not in anthropology and this limits their capacity to make sense of how it may contribute to their work. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the three professors have different numbers of hours and the hours assigned

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2   Anna Tsing has emphasized the positive and productive aspects of difference: the motion of, for example, a bicycle is afforded by the friction of the wheel against the road.

3   Examples of themes that I have conducted so far with my colleagues: Fire, Earth, Water, Future, Air, Limits, Hemp.

to 'theoreticians' are limited[4]. Finally, there is no a shared rule about how interdisciplinarity should be conducted. These elements may constrain the full realization of real interdisciplinarity, being left this to the good will of each teaching team.

In my experience, interdisciplinary was explicitly sought and the theory module had not been conceived to be an addition to the practical work leaded by the designers. We tried to integrate as a whole, the theory reflecting and intervening in the practice, while the practice being speculative too. Beyond frontal lectures, we devoted many hours to tutor students together. The classroom' design also helped, consisting of an open room with large benches located quite randomly and filled with unexpected objects such as old sofas, vintage looms or beach deckchairs. During projects' hours, students and professors moved from one table to the other, they build things, bricolage, tinker stuff and ideas. Entering for the first time in the atelier has been a refreshing experience after so many years of learning and teaching in rigidly structured rooms that erase the bodies of both students and professors and that determine a stark distinction between who teaches and who 'receive' knowledge. Despite this, I faced a number of challenges, illustrated below.

First contact

First Contact is a 1983 Australian documentary film by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. Starting from the illustration of the first contact, in the '30s, between indigenous people living the Western Highlands of New Guinea who were seeing 'white' men for their very first time and Australians arrived there for gold prospecting, the film jumps into the '80s, developing into a reflection of what it is to meet diversity, exploring the false expectations, contradictions and frictions of encounters across diversity[5]. In this section I narrate the first contact between my designer colleagues, the students and myself, the anthropologist.

When starting to teach collaboratively with designers, I expected them to mostly speak of technicalities. The first day of my presence in the class, the designer and Project leader Francesco Faccin started his lecture by showing students a full-screen sentence: "Il primo problema di un progettista è quello di definire il proprio modello di un mondo ideale, e non quello di creare un'estetica. [...] Il progettista non può non avere una sua ideologia del

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4   The project leader has 90 hours, the other designer 60 hours + 250 ca. assistance and the 'theoretician' 45 hours.

5   At the University of Lausanne, prof. Mondher Kilani was used to show this film every year at anthropology's first year students and I did the same when I replaced him after retirement. I find this fil quite effective in narrating the reciprocal prejudices and in showing the dynamic aspects of cultural processes.

mondo. Se non ce l'ha, è un imbecille che dà solo forma alle idee altrui.[6]"
The quote was taken by Enzo Mari, a designer very active in the field of industrial design but also concerned with the social impact of design. He has been part of that Italian design counterculture that, while criticizing consumerism, conceived industry as a possible escape from it (Rossi 2015). Francesco was one of Mari's pupils and his first lesson was an attempt to raise awareness among students about the fact that, as he often said, "to be a designer is not *just* to build a chair", even if he built many chairs and continues to do so. The important messages launched by Francesco increased my joy for teaching with him. At the same time, however, it left me a bit puzzled: making students reflective about the social implications of their practice should have been my task instead? What else could I have contributed?

The answer came quite soon from Francesco himself. Our first project's theme was 'Fire'. He told me that I could tell students how fire is understood and used in different cultures and in the pre-history, so revealing the primordial meaning of fire, probably shared by all world cultures and rooted in our origins. Despite my deep-hearted willingness to contribute, I remained a bit perplexed. After briefly immersing myself in James Frazer armchair anthropological accounts of fire and Levi-Straussian speculations about it, I understood that probably Francesco had false expectations about what anthropology can bring to design. I did not want to reproduce the idea of anthropologists being 'butterfly collectors' or "professional dealers in exotica" (Keesing 1985, p. 201), neither to support the concept that anthropology was to reveal primordial and universal meanings based on anecdotal and acritical observations.

I spoke with Francesco about my concerns and about my vision of anthropology as a critical study of the contemporary that can contribute to design by giving a methodology and an attitude to understand the world in which designers want to intervene. Francesco listened with interest, very open to my proposal and eager to know and experiment more together. Our mingling together was greatly facilitated by the other designer, Secil Ugur Yavuz, who make research about digital materialities. Our team collaborated for three years along six semesters, building mutual esteem and joyful learning. This also because, in the same moment I repositioned the place of my contribution within the Project, I also understood that I had to learn too. A lot of things indeed: to see the world and to think as designers do. I started to study hard the history and theory of design and avidly browse design journals. I also applied my ethnographic gaze to whatever was happening in the

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6   "The first problem of a designer is to define his [*sic*] own model of an ideal world and not that of creating an aesthetic. [...] The designer cannot exempt himself from having an ideology about the world. If he does not have it, he is an idiot who only gives shape to other people's ideas". Translated by the Author of this article.

atelier and in the faculty, starting from my other colleagues' expectations of how anthropology can contribute to design.

Intuition vs expertise

Within the faculty, anthropology was often associated to the 'ethnographic method'. During Projects, however, I was expected to give insights about the anthropological debate around the Project' theme. The time at disposal was not enough to deal with both. I therefore decided to offer students just a brief illustration of what is ethnography (why ethnography, difference with other approaches, its logic, its methods, core insights about its attitude, etc...), complemented by a discussion of a couple of readings around the Project's theme. Overall, I tried to make students sensitive about the fact that before to start producing objects, they should understand what kind of product could be useful, meaningful or practical for other people and also that, by identifying and immersing themselves in specific social situation they may gain novel insights. I let them free to apply this approach by experimenting with their project idea.

Soon I realized that, despite my initial warnings, some students misled anthropology with market research, shaping their explorations as a survey. Presenting their research, they showed statistical graphs indicating the quantitative appreciation of a feature (a colour, a shape...) of their product idea. This approach left their idea untouched that often turned out to be a very abstract and obscure idea, generating a weak product. The students who misunderstood the assignment were also those who stood out, in the class, as having a self-image of themselves as kind of artists. Some claimed that they did not need to speak with people or to observe and participate in other people's practices because they already had a precise idea about the usefulness and meaning of the product they developed. Their idea was based on experiences they had in the past, casual but crucial readings, chat with friends. Strong was the feeling that their products had to be the expression of their own subjectivity and ideas. To review other people's idea was even perceived by some of them as deleterious because it risked levelling the potential for innovation inherent in their 'intuitions'.

This made me trace an analogy: anthropologists, too, consider the subjective dimension of their experience as foundational. The tool of an ethnographer is herself: her intuition, background, skills, aspirations and so on. But, the ethnographer' subjectivity must continuously stay in dialogue with and being challenged by what opens up on her eyes and senses, what is not understood, what is hated, what is difficult to perceive, what is 'other'. Subjective features are both entrance keys and limits to understanding. Ethnographers have to learn to negotiate between immersing oneself in a social situation and

retaining one's detachment. As Cornelius Castoriadis has famously claimed "L'ethnologue qui a tellement bien assimilé la vue du monde des Bororos qu'il ne peut plus le voir qu'à leur façon n'est plus un ethnologue, c'est un Bororo – et les Bororos ne sont pas des ethnologues" (Castoriadis 1975, p. 228).

Participating in the faculty research meetings, I understood that designers too deploy their work through the tension between expertise and intuition, as exemplified by Victor Papanek famous definition of design as "the *conscious and intuitive* effort to impose meaningful order" (Papanek 1985, emphasis mine). Intuition needs to be nurtured by experience, understanding and reflection. 'Intuition' alone, instead, may give rise to 'ideologies'. While Enzo Mari encouraged, in his quote, designers to have an ideology, I argue that to have an ideology limits the capacity of designers to freely move between expertise and intuition. To have an ideology is very different from having a rich understanding of a situation. While an ideology is a set of beliefs or principles at the basis of political affiliations and identities, the anthropological approach allows to contextualize ideologies and revealing their situated nature, or to debunk them in order to show their limits, dangers and blurred borders. The anthropological approach runs contrary to ideologies because to make anthropological analysis is necessary to let go given-for-granted assumptions and learn to perceive the world according to other perspectives. The anthropological approach, indeed, consists in "learning to learn" and "to convert every certainty into a question" (Ingold 2013, p.2). I thus understood that my role may have been that of nurturing students' intuitions by helping them acquire the right attitude and methodology. This is needed in order to jump from abstract ideologies to solid analysis.

How to make sense of objects

My goal, then, was to make students aware that in order to create something meaningful they firstly had to understand the context in which they would have intervened with their design practices. Designers, indeed, do not just create new objects to be put into the world. They also create social worlds and their practice is a practice of "worldling" (Haraway 2008). The objects they design are enmeshed in myriad tangles of social, political, material, economic and cultural relations.

This understanding of objects has been inaugurated in the anthropological international literature by Arjun Appadurai (1986), then giving way to a reconsideration of what consumption is (Miller 1995). This approach, however, has had less well-known precursors such as the Italian tradition of the study of folklore (Dei 2016). In Italy, since the '50s, existed a lively anthropological debate concerning the study of peasants' material culture (Bernanrdi et al. 2011, Dei 2018, Dei and Meloni 2015). This influenced

the avant-garde collectives of the '60s and '70s (Rattalino 2018) that by rethinking designers' role within consumer society, brought attention to the socio-cultural and political significance of what they were producing. This became an international tendency with Italian design as a leading force (Clarke 2016). Some milestones of this approach are the creation of collectives such as Superstudio and Archizoom (founded in 1966, in Florence), the educational platform Global Tools and the three sections of the MoMA 1972 exhibition in New York entitled 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape'. The limit of this Italian counterculture was of being based on a certain idealization of pastoralism and primitivism (Rossi 2014) prompted by a self-administered, amateur anthropology in absence of proper training[7].

In order to keep and enhance the potential of the cultural critique advanced by these counterculture movements, without falling in its pitfalls, I proposed students an exercise that started by discussing a quote from Donna Haraway:

> I have taught a course called Science and Politics for a number of years and one year in particular, it was very early in the morning, a big lecture class at 8:00am. To get to the lecture hall we all passed this little shop that sold good coffee and chocolate croissants… And just as a way of waking up in the morning, I would ask people to unpack objects, to take a chocolate croissant and lead me through flour and chocolate and butter and sugar and coffee and connect us to world histories that way. I would ask people to pick an object, the T-shirt that the person sitting next to them was wearing, what was printed on it, the label, the very fact of labeling, the fibre composition. If it's got polyester, then take me through the history of Purity Hall and research labs at Du Pont; you know, back me up into nitrogen chemistry. If it's cotton, then back me into pesticides and the California water projects and where cotton is grown and the length of the fibre and what about what you are wearing on your chest? I would ask people, as a way of talking about science and politics, to take a pencil, a piece of paper, the architecture of the lecture hall that you walked past; pick something and get the class started by giving me an account of it. (Haraway in Dumit 2014, p. 344)

Then, students had to identify an object that in some way (through analogy with a topic, a concept or a process) related to their project idea. They had to analyse the object in the course of two to three weeks, taking into account 13 analytical 'dimensions': Labor, Professional/Epistemological, Material, Technological, Context and Situatedness, Political, Economic, Textual, Bodily/Organic, Historical, Educational, Mythological, Symbolic. The analysis of every

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7   I usually give students to read and comment Horace Miner article on the 'Nacirema' (1956) which is a provocation against the attitude to over-emphasize cultural difference and turning the 'other' into primitive. See also Fabietti et al. 2002.

dimension required some search, including observing social situations and speaking with people, bibliographic, media and web searches.

I made clear to students that this is not equal to make ethnography, more similar to an exploratory stage of it, but still useful to lay the foundation for some of its core tenets. The exercise that I gave to students was a rearranged version of the "Writing the Implosion" exercise, originally proposed by Joe Dumit (2014) and then developed in multiple versions through Dumit's colleagues in the form of "The Artifact Project"[8]. I named my version "The Thing Project" to emphasize the idea (grounded in etymology and noted earlier by Heiddeger) that a 'thing' is an assemblage of things and processes, very different from the common sense idea of a 'thing' as something self-contained and defined by its physical boundaries. But, importantly, the choice of the object should have been very specific: for example, not just a t-shirt but a Lacoste bought by the student's father in the '90s. Against the abstract idea of weightless objects flying into a platonic sky, I wanted students to appreciate that the object they would have developed should be part of a specific setting, rendered with vivid details. The exercise, to use Ingold terms (2013, p.8), is a way to make an anthropology *of* an object (learning *about* it) as well as *with* an object (learning *from* it).

At first attempts with this exercise, students did not easily see the connection of the exercise with the project obligation to develop, within the end of the semester, a design product. Even if the exercise was amply explained, and each dimension included a set of questions that guided students' search, students often mismatched some dimensions. The economic dimension was misunderstood as a task in assessing the commercial potential of the object they wished to develop (back to market research!) instead than identifying how the object's value was expressed and with what consequences (what kinds of capital, debt, credit, labor relations are involved in producing, marketing, and circulating it; how costs are calculated and by whom, etc…). The political dimension, instead, was perceived useless: they lamented that the relations I asked them to trace were too distant from their primary concern, the object.

They often compared my assignment to that given in another 'theory' course, that of 'theory of cultural consumption'. That assignment, consisted in charting the relations an object entertained with a household (as illustrated in Mattozzi, 2018). Similarly to my exercise, students were asked to map, for three days, the network of relations around an object. This is, I think, a useful exercise to train students to observe and describe, starting from something which they find easy to approach, both logistically but also conceptually. Moreover, it gives students the opportunity to observe that objects are larger than their boundaries and transform through use. The physical features of objects as form and texture, for example, are largely absent from anthropo-

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8   See http://web.mit.edu/dumit/www/artifact-frame.html.

logical accounts even if these are important aspects of analysis because express intentions, uses and worldviews (Mattozzi 2019). Unfortunately, there are few examples of ethnographies of design (for example Murphy 2015, Schüll 2014). These show how such an approach can bring a heightened sensitivity to otherwise neglected aspects. The exercise, therefore, has lots of merits but problems only arise when it is misunderstood as 'ethnography' in the anthropological sense, as students seemed to do.

Issues of scale

The task of tracing relationships in the world and in history instead than in a household in the present was perceived by students as a 'too big' assignment. The difference between the two exercises does not lie, however, only in the scale of relations to be identified but it has to do with *how scale* is taken as an appropriate analytical description of social practices.

The approach proposed in the household exercise takes inspiration from Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour semiotic-bent methodology for the description of phenomena (1992). While for approaches inspired by semiotics the analysis of a scale (usually micro or meso) is in itself the research result, the anthropological perspective instead is to consider neither the 'micro' scale (an object or a household), nor just the 'macro' scale ('the society', 'the economy') as indicative, focusing attention to how these enter into relation by moving across the so-called 'meso' scale. My colleague's exercise adheres to Latour's suggestion "to attend first to the associations out of which [an artefact] is made and only later [to] look at how it has renewed the repertoire of social ties" (in Mattozzi 2018, p. 118). This gives primacy to objects rather than to the social context: Latour famously rejected the concept of 'context' or 'society' as pure abstractions of no meaning or use. The idea is that there is no need to trace a context much larger than the object or phenomena analysed because whatever meaningful may be in a context, it will anyway emerge in it.

Issues of context and relations

A context, however, is not a pure, solid and static background but a "representation of representations" (Rabinow 1986, p. 250). This partial lack of objectivity[9], instead than diminishing the strength of anthropological

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9   In use this term here in its conventional sense. For more sophisticated understanding of objectivity as something attainable exactly through contextualization see Barad 2007.

accounts, enhance them because makes explicit the kind of politics that support specific relations in specific times and places: "there is one interest which anthropological writing must continue to endorse, and that is the question of relationships involved in communication. Relationships are specifiable only with reference to contexts." (Strathern 1987, p. 269).

Relations – expressed in numerous concepts like assemblage, entanglement, network, meshwork, and fluid spaces – have become themselves the main object of analysis in much of anthropological research. The technological innovations of the 21st century, emphasizing and permitting more connectivity, have contributed to make relations an anthropological fetish, an inherently good thing (Strathern 2014). While relational approaches diverge at least as much as they converge, acritical uses of relational-thinking dismiss that the concept of relation is a particular artefact of Euro-North-American knowledge-making and overlook that relations also imply cuts and breaks[10]. These crucially point to the borders and limits of relations that, through the very fact of connecting, necessarily leave out other kind of connections. This issue is at the heart of the mounting critique against a sort of 'ethics of relations', at the expense of the possibility to 'opt out' from relations or to detach (Candea et al. 2015). Every discipline has its own ways to make sense of what the 'context' is (Seaver 2015) but neglecting its importance may encourage the already embedded tendency of design students to sidestep the stage of understanding what the context is, immediately projecting themselves toward the endeavour of creating a new context, free to imagine worlds unleashed from history and politics.

Anthropologist and environmental activist Kim Fortun has criticized the Latourian approach as "a functionalist semiotics, with little history, paradox, harsh conflicts of interest or possibilities for play….In the insistence on the meso – a sociology of association – cross-scale interactions and structural conditions seem to be written off." (Fortun 2014, p. 315). Latour's methodological mantra that everything is inside the network (Latour 2005) has as a consequence that everything that *comes to be considered* as outside the network remain invisible, with very important political repercussions. Fortun, in her article, takes issue with one of Latour's last projects (AIME[11]) by showing that in that project associations of various phenomena are made in a way that leaves out what economists call 'externalities (for example, pollution in the case of industrial development). A similar remark has been put forth by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) who has emphasized the political disengagement inherent in Latour' idea that objects are "matters of concerns". She has proposed to substitute this concept with "matters of care": a feminist-bent concept, with stronger affective and ethical connota-

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10   For a similar critique in the field of art performance see Bishop, 2004.
11   AIME: An Inquiry into Modes of Existence, see http://modesofexistence.org/

tions that encourages to make *explicit* (and not embedded and silent) what are we – as social scientists – caring for or neglecting through the framing of the phenomena we analyse.

While I agree with these critiques, I think that the first Latour (the one of the Pasteurization of France) was different from his subsequent and various transformation. Roger Sansi has indeed argued that there is a tension and a contradiction between the first Latour who described how actants emerge within "events" in the course of history and his departure from this approach, increasingly proposing a general descriptive sociology that flattens the depth of his previous accounts. It is at this juncture, I believe, that Latour – and who takes him as main reference – also departs from an anthropological approach.

Issues of description

The capacity, or willingness, to acknowledge for the specific framing of a phenomena is made possible, in anthropology, by its being a comparative science: "what it compares are not bounded objects or entities but ways of being. It is the constant awareness of alternative ways of being ...that defines the anthropological attitude". This is an embodied pedagogy crafted by the "comparative yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life", an inquiry grounded "in a profound understanding of what life *is* like in particular times and places." (Ingold 2013, p.4). This expertise guides observations and descriptive practices, allowing to derive claims that go beyond the specific case studied.

This, I believe, is why Tim Ingold has complained against the reduction of anthropology to ethnography, denouncing "the usurpation of its name [ethnography] for other ends" (2013, p.4). Ingold has observed that appropriations of ethnography may be problematic when the phase of description is envisaged as "a task somehow opposed to the project of theory", proposing instead that "any act of description entails a movement of interpretation." (2011, p. 237). In anthropology, there is generally a strong acknowledgment of the fact that "praxis tout seul explique pas, est pas transparente" (Descola 2011, p. 73). A specific expertize and training is required to make sense of the silent and invisible aspects of objects and situations (Hirschauer 2006) and many in the history of anthropology are the examples of the fact that the same practice can be observed and described in very different ways according to the social positionality of the viewer (see the famous debate on Cook, in Borofsky 1997).

Ethnography, in the anthropological sense, is not just to describe relations but is an *epistemological intervention* to contribute to imagine socio-political horizons of co-habitation in a world that is connected but also full of vio-

lence and injustice through the very fact that we are all so connected. When ethnography is reduced to a mere method that can be translated across domains with very different agendas it loses its strength and real contribution:

> My real purpose in challenging the idea of a progression from ethnography to anthropology has not been to belittle ethnography, or to treat it as an afterthought, but rather to liberate it, above all from the tyranny of method. Nothing has been more damaging to ethnography than its representation under the guise of the 'ethnographic method'. Of course, ethnography has its methods, but it is not a method. (Ingold 2011, p. 242)

Ethnography is a not a set of procedural guidelines but an attitude made professional and a work of intellectual craftsmanship. Of course, it is not a possession of a single discipline[12] but the use of the term may be misleading when appropriated by disciplines, professionals or scholars not willing to accept its epistemic practices related to the role of concepts such as scale, context, comparison and description.

Through their negative reactions, however, students made me aware that my teaching method was not appropriate in relation to their experience and background. I understood that, indeed, I asked to identify too many relations. In order to make "The Thing Project" more manageable by students, I divided the class into groups and assigned three dimensions to each group to be then discussed with the class. This proved to be successful, finally, because students could devote their attention to few sets of relations at a time. They shared in the class very interesting and in-depth accounts of how specific objects entangle with various dimensions. These accounts generated lively discussions – sometimes very challenging also for the teacher –mobilizing students' imagination and sensibility about what an object is. This, in general, reflected in the quality of the products they developed at the end of the semester.

Ethnography, or how to make sense of objects in the world

How to teach ethnography to design students, then? First of all, I think that a preliminary course in anthropology and ethnography – not linked

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12   Silvia Gherardi, for example, a leading scholar in the 'practice turn' in sociology, has emphasized that to look at practices is not to describe a series of activities, but it is to depict the "texture of practices" (2012, p. 156): the qualitative aspects taken by associations in their becoming. In this light, context is important because far from being a static background, it is the site where up and down, inside and outside, big and small are co-implicated into each other.

to projects – would be essential[13]. In projects, time is limited and students are too anxious to arrive at the end of the semester with a product and the quality of its development may fade into the background. This would also make students aware of the differences between different approaches within 'theory' courses. With reference to the different approaches within the faculty, all clustered as 'ethnography' by students, I tried to make them aware that they are complementary and reinforce each other but they have differences in terms of scale and aims. For example, another colleague, an art historian, assigned another exercise to enhance students' analytic and descriptive capacity. She asked them to observe and describe how objects relate to each other and to the space within Matisse 'The Red Studio[14]'. The analysis of the objects' formal and iconographic value had to be taken as traces to reconstruct Matisse' artistic biography. This exercise, as the one in the household, is a great exercise because is close to design students' interests and focus (objects and relations among them) but cannot be the closure of their analysis. To become skilled and responsible designers, they also have to be able to zoom out from an apartment or a studio.

Anthropology not only adds the 'meso' and 'macro' scale but also offers the challenge to bridge scales and also to bridge other methods which, in their strict adherence to a one-level scale, may be less comprehensive: "Interfaces among scales are therefore interfaces among methodologies, and the interfaces among scales are the spaces to inhabit, to give meaning to" (Bougleux 2015, p. 70). But, unfortunately, few weeks after presenting this paper at the 2018 SIAA conference, I discovered that, in order to comply with institutional and internal demands, anthropology has been replaced by another 'theory' course starting from the 202-2021 academic year.

This, I think, is a missed opportunity for both design and anthropology. In the '80s, Lucius Burckhardt – in reaction against the Ulm School of Design technocratic solutions – criticized "invisible design" as "oblivious to its social impact". He envisaged a future in which invisible design "consciously takes into account the *invisible* overall system comprised of objects and interpersonal relationships" (Burckhardt 1980, p.26). Today, in our globalized and ecologically suffering world, this call is ever more needed. Objects are forever incomplete and in production and precisely their mixture of openness and closure is their challenge. Objects are crucial to politics and democracy not despite but because they are riddled with ambiguity. The meaning of an object cannot pre-given fully by socio-cultural conventions, neither by its formal features but emerge through social practices. Objects are always-to-be-achieved constructions of something bounded, yet heter-

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13   At the Faculty, there is an anthropology course, but it is only addressed to 2nd and 3d year and is optional.

14   A 1911 painting of Henri Matisse portraying the objects populating his studio.

ogeneous and unstable. Because of that, objects are first and foremost sites of negotiation before being sites of consumption or functional tools. The analysis of what an object is, therefore, cannot stay contained within the borders of the object itself: it overflows its borders to a such an extent that designers need to broaden their perspectives too. And here lies the salience of Mari's quote, as an encouragement to go beyond the implicit normative dimensions of design institutional culture.

Conclusion

During a research meeting to discuss how to approach artistic practices through ethnography, the project supervisor – an art historian much open to anthropology – humorously claimed that I was "hopelessly partying too much for anthropology". Yes, I am; this being my pride and my limit at the same time. As philosopher of science Ian Hacking has observed: "I am not interdisciplinary in the sense of trying to break down disciplinary boundaries, but rather a philosopher who tries to be disciplined enough to pick up what is going on in other disciplines." This is what I tried to do in this article, in which I have illustrated my experience as an anthropologist teaching to and with designers. Starting from the requests and expectations of the first contact and continuing through the various frictions and failures I experienced along the years, I showed how these made me able to finally develop a fruitful educational intervention but also to better articulate how anthropology can better contribute to a design curriculum.

The main argument of the article is that theory and practice are not dichotomous, rather they are co-implicated because theoretical innovation is at the basis for design practices. Paul Dourish, a designer active in Human-Computer Interaction has observed that anthropology may contribute to design by

> raising questions, challenging perceived understandings, giving silenced perspectives voice, and creating new conceptual understandings. That is, it may be destabilizing rather than instrumental, engaging in processes of defamiliarization of topics, sites, and settings understood complacently. However, this is not to say that this is not usefully engaged with the design concerns...; conceptual reformulation is itself a basis for design thinking. (2014, p.12)

Given the very nature of the its endeavour, anthropology is less complacent than other approaches: it does not allow that the frame of a practice – whatever it be – to not be itself open to question. Anthropology surely can serve design needs – from the most conventional as selling more goods to the more politically engaged as designing a better world – but, in so doing,

it also broadens and sometimes refigures the way in which design frames its problems and concepts. Anthropology can thus be useful to design but in forms that are different from those usually expected or imagined (Dourish 2007, Satchell and Dourish 2009). Design students can benefit from encountering anthropology because it prompts them to disturb some of their overly abstract, 'ideological', or pre-given assumptions and framing of problems without suffocating – rather encouraging – their intuitions and passion for making things tangible.

A related argument is that ethnography is not simply a method or a set of guidelines, it is a theoretical practice. The ways in which ethnography is currently employed by a number of professional domains and disciplines – as simply a 'method' – constraints its potentialities and therefore is a missed opportunity. To neglect cross-scale interactions and the role of theory in observation and description is detrimental not only on an ethical standpoint but also because not knowing 'the context' or not being able to challenge ideologies and intuitions expose designers to possible failures. As designer Tomas Maldonado once wrote "designing that is devoid of a lucid critical consciousness (both ecological and social) […] will always […] evade contingent reality" (1972, p. 50).

Lucy Suchman, drawing on her experience as an anthropologist working among designers in a corporate sector, has written that "conventional design methods are (necessarily) silent on matters that anthropology would be interested in articulating" (2011, p. 3). My experience has been different: I have found that most of students and teachers in my faculty are eager to know more and experiment across disciplinary boundaries but this should be further supported. Collaborations between design and anthropology are productive for both. Being in a design faculty – with its unruly imagination, theoretical anarchy and focus on practical outcomes – has liberated me from some intellectual rigidity. I also learned to make anthropological knowledge less abstract, more focused and applied, even tangible. While in this article I have mostly highlighted the advantages design can gain from allying with anthropology, I also think that alliances with our fellow designers could give anthropology additional means to intervene in reality and in contemporary issues, given design capacity to make ideas tangible, appealing and visible. In a world not anymore made of 'cultures' separated from 'natures', design – as the "science of the artificial" (Simon 1969) – has in last decades increasingly expanded its influence and blurred its boundaries[15].

But it is exactly the success that design is enjoying and its historical opportunity to interfere on a large scale on people daily life that brings the need

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15   Design has multiplied in various declinations, some of them with clear echoes with social sciences such as service design, social design, user experience design and speculative design.

for design students to gain the capacity to become reflective about their own practices and ways of knowing. In the 21th century, designers need to move from the idea that design simply is an "attitude" (Rawsthorn 2018) to the idea that this attitude also needs to be nurtured. In this, I contend, anthropology may have a role.

This article mirrors my specific situation and is also influenced by the way in which I practice anthropology, probably different from other colleagues. Yet I think that my experience may be suggestive for others too, or at least it may trigger productive frictions and consequently better articulations of these preliminary insights. Mine, therefore, is not a call for the policing or purifying of anthropology but, at contrary, it is an encouragement for anthropologists to open-up to ever broader spaces of interdisciplinarity, "multiplying the relations" (Sansi and Strathern 2016, p. 436) with the various professionals and practitioners with whom we collaborate by interfering and refiguring our reciprocal projects and practices.

Acknowledgments

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