THE SIGNS EMBEDDED IN DISCARDED OBJECTS, *RESIGN*

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ABSTRACT

Resign is a collective of designers founded in Faenza (RA) in 2007 by Elisabetta Amadori, Giovanni Delvecchio and Andrea Magnani. The work of Resign has been exhibited in the Italian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale and in the Salone del Mobile in Milan. I have decided to write an academic paper about them because I consider Resign an interesting example of activism in design, with radical thought and much practical action consistent with it.

I have organized this paper into two main sections. In the first there is a critical review of the methodology developed by Resign. This is important if we want to understand their projects and products because these should be read above all as examples and provocations able to speak about the theoretical and moral assumptions underlying this methodology. The second part of the article is a historical analysis of Resign's activities, from its beginnings to the present day. Finally, in the conclusion, I will assess the importance that the method proposed by the group may have both in relation to the profession of the designer and in relation to *Design Sciences*.

RESIGN'S THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Resign is a meta-project that aims to challenge the loss of a sense of contemporary design, especially in relation to the consumerist and capitalist system in which we live in. The Master Degree thesis discussed by Andrea Magnani and Giovanni Delvecchio at the ISIA University of Faenza is a manifesto of Resign objectives. They wrote two complementary texts, *Design Era* and *Era Design* in which they brought out many of the problems and contradictions of contemporary design drawing on texts such as Rem Koolhaas *Junkspace*. They argue, for example, that the role of design in companies is more and more subordinate to marketing management. For this reason, few objects are radically innovative in terms of utility and meaning, while aesthetic reconfigurations of existing products are growing exponentially.

The companies feel the need to use a strategy of frequent renewal of their commercial proposals. They therefore need an increasing number of designers working on increasingly ephemeral bases. At the end of the nineties in Italy about 500 students a year obtained a degree in design. Today that number has grown to 5000. Each of these professionals is involved in designing products or communication, trying to distinguish them from all others to win the challenge of commercial success. This exuberance of creative output makes the world we live in extremely chaotic, because each one of these is an "independent path of meaning, often with extemporaneous purposes and, in any case, in total absence of unifying projects" (Caggiano 2008). Designers, in this context, should be able to astonish and seduce only with new and innovative aesthetic solutions. This kind of competition, on which companies base their commercial success, while it is becoming more and more extreme is, at the same time increasingly unable to satisfy consumers. Since purchase was motivated by continuous reform of stylistic elements and by sterile technological innovation, the joy of the purchase and possession is necessarily brief and transient.
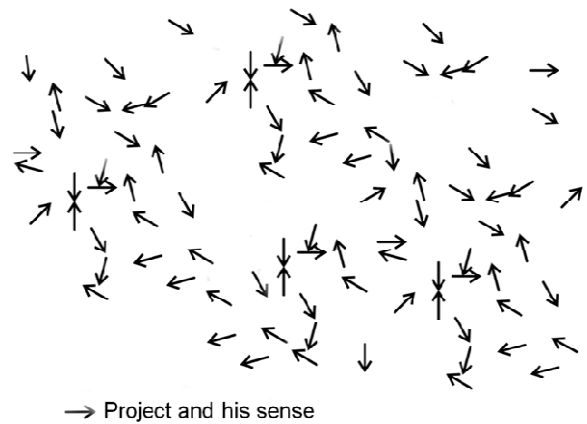

→ Project and his sense

Fig. 1 This image represents contemporary design: a confusion of products, each with its own message, each with a different direction. Courtesy: Andrea Magnani

In recent years we have seen the growth of some radically different design models, which, although they are very sector-specific, seem to be able to expand the horizons of design. Let us consider Wikipedia, for example, which is probably the most detailed and up-to-date existing Encyclopedia. This is a product developed by the community, because anyone who considers himself competent in a single topic can help to create the corresponding entry in the encyclopaedia[1]. But how is it possible that this model can generate reliable and useful results, rather than a jumble of misleading entries? In my opinion, there are two answers to this. On one hand, each user can evaluate the reliability of that entry, reporting errors and improving it. On the other hand, the design of the website itself is what determines the order and reliability required. In fact, Wikipedia is based on definite

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[1] Chris Anderson in *The Long Tail* (2006) exhaustively analyzes the socioeconomic aspects of products such as Wikipedia.

editorial rules that standardize content and facilitate drafting and correction by users.

This is a good example of successful metaproject whose value and authority depends on its capacity to give value to its contents. As I said earlier, this example is very sectorial: an effort should be made to translate this model to the design domain. The confusion and superficiality of contemporary design, as compared, for example, to the substantial convergence of modernism, is probably attributable to the increasing complexity of our society, which makes difficult the establishment of new unifying currents, especially those based on theoretical assumptions. Yet, some cultural trends are able to influence the market. Slow Food is successfully challenging restaurant and food production standards, changing the value perception of biodiversity and quality of food, through cultural action widespread throughout the world. From the sharing of certain ethical values, countless individuals and groups in 130 countries have joined the association, founding local associations, each able to promote independent projects[2]. Thus, both Slow Food and Wikipedia are metaprojects that, in different ways, take their strength from the widespread sharing of knowledge and values.

As noted earlier, designers need new methodologies that enable them to avoid mixing their projects with millions of others

indiscriminately. The element that is intended to question radically this profession is once again the opportunity to make connections quick and widespread, due to the internet and the communication tools of the present. Connections are tools for sharing knowledge, but also for the creation of multidisciplinary networks where resources are optimized. This phenomenon usually occurs in large corporations and professional studios, but also through the establishment of collectives or professional networks. There is a big difference between these two areas because, in the latter case, the cohesive element of individuals is not necessarily the sharing of know-how to offer a competitive product in economic terms but rather the adherence to cultural assumptions and models.

RESIGN METHODOLOGY

The Resign founders have always thought of their work in terms of a metaproject. In very general terms the word "metaproject" refers to an "emerging conceptual framework aimed at defining and creating social, economic and technical infrastructures in which new forms of collaborative design can take place. It consists of a series of practical design-related tools for achieving this (...) [also] through the collaboration of designers within interdisciplinary 'metadesign' teams[3]".

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[2] Slow Food aims to protect and promote the production of local traditional foods, which are destined to be replaced by commercial varieties, because of globalization.

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metadesign, on 5-Jul-2011.

In the literature there are several examples of meta-project in most of which the designers are not professional but simply citizens interested in solving a common issue through the draft and the production of goods or services. In a metaproject the professional designer's role is to provide the right tools for the management of the project.

In the Resign metaproject there are slightly different assumptions and purposes. To limit the "liquefaction of meaning, of forms and systems" that makes contemporary design so chaotic and self-referential it is possible to "channel the creativity of the individual actors towards shared directions, through the creation of soft channels of meaning, based on theoretical assumptions and not on truth and theorems" (Caggiano 2008). This methodological approach is what the Resign collective calls a "metaproject", which is consistent with the general definition found in the literature.
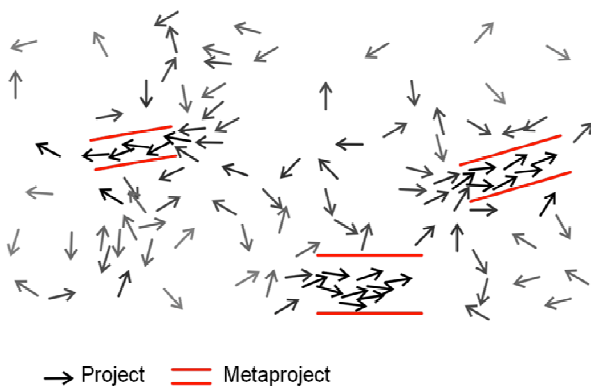

Fig. 2 The image symbolizes the action of meta-projects, seen as channels able to direct individual projects through common values and meanings.
Courtesy: Andrea Magnani

In the Resign metaproject the people who are intended to design are professional designers who choose to join the collective because they share its values and purposes. These designers can leverage the tools that the Resign collective provides to develop projects individually or collectively, e.g. the processing laboratory present in Faenza and the network of suppliers, distributors and media partners.

The designers are usually trained beforehand through an intensive workshop that the group proposes each year, the Resign Academy. In this way they ensure a theoretical and methodological consistency in all projects that are proposed under the brand name of Resign. This makes the Resign metaproject similar to a company's product development, typically based on a brand identity. But there is a difference. While the corporate identity is typically based on aesthetics (branding) or technology (patents), in the case of metaproject Resign identity is based on a theoretical model: a channel of meaning that the designers can freely choose to follow because motivated by an intellectual affinity.

The name "Resign" well represents the founding principles of the collective. In English "to resign" means to give up some position of responsibility in business or in politics, for example. In this case, Resign can be understood as giving up an old model of designing in order to propose a new one, which is the metaproject. On the other hand, Resign means Reuse of Signs. In fact, the collective bases its activities on bringing to light the signs that lie in discarded objects such as memory,

forms and narrative symbols. Resign wants to build a dense system of references that are made visible through the assembly, inscription and processing of un-used objects. They want to build a poetry of discarded objects, an emotional language able to convey the ethics of reuse, in contrast to the consumerism that reigns today.

Fig. 3 Eravamo quattro amici al bar. Photo: Andrea Piffari

Resign is based on:

1 - An atelier where the members of the collective, the guests and the students can work. As in a craftsman's workshop here students can learn by doing, sharing skills and knowledge, creating face-to-face relationships.

2 - A network of external links based on the strategic importance of skills complementarity, in a logic of integrated systems.

Thanks to these resources, Resign intends to pursue three main goals.

1 - education, i.e. the Resign Academy

2 - experimental research, i.e. the activation of new projects, the individual and collective production of prototypes and small series

3 - diffusion of their theoretical apparatus, with the interpersonal network cited above, but also with performances and with the diffusion of their products, by fairs, art galleries, private buyers, gifts.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE RESIGN GROUP

The Resign collective was founded in 2007 by Elisabetta Amadori, Giovanni Delvecchio and Andrea Magnani, within the Do Nucleo Culturale Association. The primary purpose of the collective, at least initially, was to use a building that the town of Faenza assigned them for the promotion of cultural activities. This building is the recently restored former municipal warehouse for lost items. According to the plans of the municipality the first floor must be furnished, with as low an investment as possible, to become a dormitory that can accommodate several visitors during the Faenza Contemporanea art fair. Thus, the Resign collective began to make the beds, the lounge and the offices, assembling and processing discarded furniture. This activity engaged the founders of Resign production for several months, and it was a first chance to develop a design methodology through numerous experiments. Elisabetta, Andrea and Giovanni lived in this space while they prepared their university exams and this was the operational base for the first projects of the

collective, such as *Free Object* and *Door to Door Designer*. Subsequently, in the space next to the dormitory, they equipped a large laboratory for processing metal, glass and wood. Andrea Magnani and Giovanni Delvecchio graduated at the ISIA of Faenza in 2008 - tutor Stefano Caggiano - and discussed two theses that theorize the metaproject as an applicative tool. Many of the objects produced in this first year of existence of the collective have been used here as practical examples in support of the concepts advocated in the thesis.

FREE OBJECT

The history of Free Object started with the beginning of the group when Giovanni Delvecchio, during the preparation of his thesis at the ISIA, argued with his tutor Stefano Caggiano that the time to design and produce new objects had passed. With the help of the collective Giovanni collected several unused couches, chairs and tables, cleaned them and placed them in the squares, roundabouts and loggias of Faenza. Initially this activity was no more than a game, a provocation. Some objects disappeared immediately, while others were destroyed or covered with graffiti. An elderly lady tied a large armchair onto her bicycle to bring it at home, showing that what has no value for somebody may have enough to justify such an effort for another.

Several elements of interest can be found in this first project . First, the Free Objects have no value

in themselves because they have been discarded. As for Marcel Duchamp's *ready-made*, also in this case the object acquires value through the action of the author which brings out its aesthetic and symbolic value. The author works through re-contextualization: objects are devoid of interest until they stay at the recycling centre but they become relevant when they are placed on a pedestal, like a traffic circle, a square, a loggia. This exhibit makes the subject interesting because it gives visibility and inserts it in an unusual context. On a second reading, it is also a provocative instance of elimination of private property hence the name "Free Object". Over the years that followed this dissemination of objects became more sophisticated. Starting from an action during the Salone del Mobile of Milan 2008 in Zona Tortona each object was equipped with a metal plaque with the inscription "Free Object" and with brief instructions on what the discoverer would have to perform. The instructions were: to detect the object, to process it at will and to put it back in the initial site. As can be seen, the purpose of the project has changed.

In this case, users can interact freely with the object, so the final results cannot be predicted by the designer. An example of this second operation is a crude wooden bench installed in a park in Faenza which quickly disappeared and reappeared a few weeks later with an open book nailed to one side of the seat. The actions related to Free Object began in 2007 and are continuing still today.

Fig. 4 A Free Object

DOOR TO DOOR DESIGNER

Door to door designer has been an ongoing project since 2008. Door to Door Designer is aimed at giving new life to an object that the client wants to discard, even if he is attached to it, because it is incompatible with his decor, excessively worn, etc. On the Resign website[4] we read: "The door to door designer re-uses objects through a strong relationship with the client, (ad personam), analysing necessities of his property, (site specific). On our site it is possible to contact the desired designer and give him the object to be treated." Once the collaboration has been activated the designer goes to the customer's house and picks up the object which will be transported to Resign's atelier and processed. Finally the object is returned to the customer with renewed meaning and value. In many cases this operation is free - the gift embodies strong and lasting relationships. Another point of interest in this project is that anyone can request to become a Door to Door Designer anywhere in the world.

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[4] http://www.resign.it/doortodoor

All he has to do is to fill out the form on the Resign website, have sufficient manual skills and understand the spirit of this initiative.

Fig. 5 An anonymous and worn coffee table has been transformed into the surface of the moon.

SALONE SATELLITE 2007

As many know, the Salone Satellite (at the Salone del Mobile of Milan) is an important institution that proposes to give international visibility to a selection of emerging designers. In the edition of 2007, Resign illegally occupied stand number E3 of the Salone Satellite inaugurating an exhibition entitled "Stop ideas. Just pay ". The occupation was an event aiming to say out loud that "ideas become less and less discriminating, more and more short, more and more, therefore increasingly uncontrollable and difficult to differentiate by, for instance, patents. (...) The structure of the market as we know it is destined to change: people begin to get used to having everything now and for free. Symptoms are to be found in the music and film market." The stand is set up with a myriad of crumpled sheets of paper

containing ideas for products gathered into two containers: new ideas for 1 euro and old ideas for 10 cents[5].

Fig. 6 Occupied stand construction

SYMBOLIC VALUE OF OBJECTS. EMBEDDED VALUE AND INSCRIPTED VALUE

In the next few paragraphs the analysis of three products by the Resign collective is proposed. These objects were selected from many others in an attempt to represent by example the methodological setting of Resign. The reconfiguration of the retrieved objects can be done in two ways: sometimes it is aimed at

bringing out the symbolic aspects embedded in them. In other cases the meaning of the objects emerges through an inscription of signs on their surface.

SEDIE DI CORTE

In Italian "corte" means the king's court, but it recalls also "corteccia", bark. The chairs were provided by a pharmacy specialising in natural products. Giovanni, Andrea and Elisabetta worked with the idea of remedy, thinking about the natural defence that covers wood in nature. Giovanni says: "the painted wood of the furniture was originally covered with a natural protection: the bark. We applied this idea to some very common style chairs, to remember their past and our present. Before applying the bark, the chairs have to be sanded. This is a long and boring task, but enables the wood to breathe again. The chair is more delicate where it has no paint, but gets worn and old in a natural way, like people that use natural remedies and wisdom".

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[5] A detailed account of the action and a complete statement of intent, is available at Andrea Magnani's Blog *Design is Not* Dead, http://designisnotdead.blogspot.com/2007/05/occupazio ne-stand-e3-salone-satellit-e.html

Fig. 7 Sedie di Corte. Photo: Andrea Piffari

MAGICAL OBJECT NO. 1

Another piece of Resign history is Magical Object, a performance made at Stazione Leopolda in Florence in 2009. In this case the symbolic value of the retrieved objects is highlighted through an esoteric performance. Objects are loaded with signs and gestures, and therefore acquire mysterious and initiation ritual meanings[6]. Through this public performance the object is transformed. The gestures give it meaning and energy. When an archaeological object is found, a strange utensil or an amulet for example, it is difficult to discover its use, origin and the rituals

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[6] A video of this performance can be found at this address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pmSZa_zCAc .

associated with it. Similarly, the Magical Object is never too explicit in the narration of the manufacturer's intents. It must preserve the aura of mystery conferred by its ritual use and unusual appearance.

Fig. 8 Magical Objects

POLTRONE CHAIR

In addition to Elisabetta, Andrea and Giovanni, other designers have joined the collective in these years after attending the Resign Academy. One of these is the Argentinian Zoeli Rota. Her project, Embodied Memory, works on the memory of objects. She says: "Some objects seem to have many stories to tell, written in their worn surface and obsolete forms. This chair, for instance, was found on Murano island (Venice). The wear of the fabric and paint caused by decades of use evokes the presence of its owners." The designer has taken action on the object by printing her own body on it. This inscription of a visible sign translates what was originally a feeling. This act is driven to convey impressions, memories and feelings in the users that can be very different depending on their experience.

Fig. 9 Poltrone Chair

RESIGN ACADEMY

In 2009 the collective Resign set up the Resign Academy with the aim of training a limited number of designers each year. Three Academies have been held so far: the first in Verona in 2009, then in Faenza (RA) in 2010 and this year in Sassello (SV). These are structured as intensive workshops with 12 participants selected on the basis of their portfolios. During the three weeks of attendance the students are invited to live at the site of the workshop (excluding weekends). Thanks to this long co-existence , which of course

allows many convivial moments, members can build solid professional relationships.

Participants at the Academy are professional designers who are interested in improving their skills and poetry. They must learn how to create objects with their own hands. The creativity of the designer, who must build a working and saleable prototype, must be subject to the physical laws. He must know the difficulties of processing typical of each material and component. The processing laboratory located on the site of the Academy allows participants to perform most of the necessary operations for the development of prototypes. The network of local artisans can provide help with the most difficult or sensitive processes. The raw material for producing the prototypes is found especially by visiting used furniture warehouses and local recycling centres.
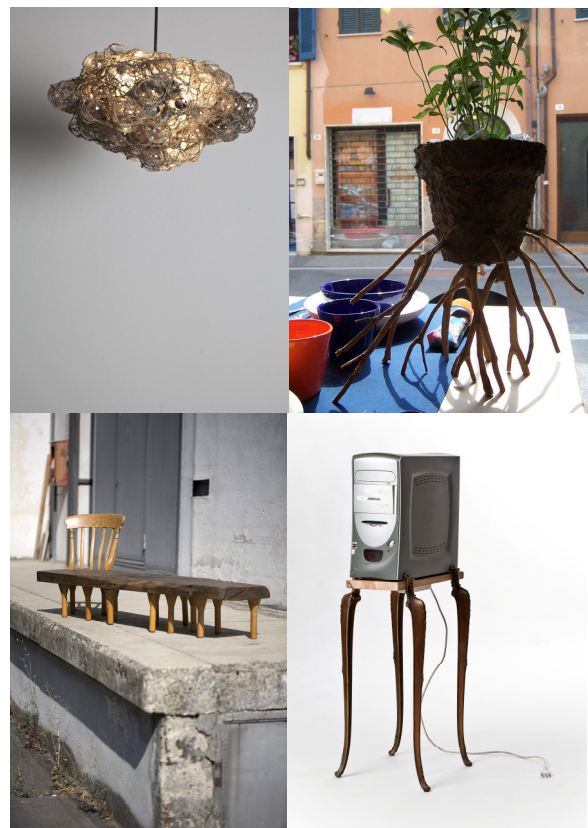
Fig. 10 A selection of products by Resign Academy

This workshop has been able to attract students from the main Italian Universities and also from China, Korea, Argentina and Norway. As far as the founders are concerned teaching is an opportunity to bring themselves forward, creating a dialogue with new personalities, each the bearer of different visions and skills. Students are encouraged to maintain a working relationship with Resign even after the workshop: their products are in the Resign catalogue and web site and they can participate in fairs and events with the collective. In this sense, the metaproject Resign resembles a business incubator. Each participant is enabled to develop their professional activities independently but with the tools of production, visibility and a distribution network provided by the collective. For instance, this spring Resign was once again at the Salone Satellite. Renouncing the anti-institutional polemic which characterised the occupation of 2007, this time Resign simply wanted a platform of international visibility to present its products and the methods of the Resign Academy.

Resign is establishing some strong relationships with institutions, design professionals and critics, art galleries and journalists. Some of them have been involved with lectures during the Academy. Paolo Ulian and Odoardo Fioravanti (Winner of the *Compasso d'Oro* prize in 2011), for example, agreed to spend an entire day with students, reviewing their projects, discussing the future of design, having dinner together and debating until late at night.

CONCLUSION

The metaproject, intended as a channel capable of directing the work of designers to a cultural and ethical common ground, can have several configurations, and Resign is just one of many possible examples. However this is an interesting case study because it seems to be able to combine theory with practice in an effective way through projects and products, networking and teaching. Resign is also an instance of socio-political change of an unusual sort in contemporary design. The expressive instrument of Resign, a reprocessing of discarded objects' potential value, is used to argue critically and constructively against the consumer system and the role of the profession of design within it.

The revolutionary role of modernism probably expired several decades ago and designers need new methodologies capable of giving meaning and direction to their work. An alternative to the visual and theoretical chaos of our time is needed because we are tired of the vacuity which is justified by the "postmodernist" critic.

The meta-projects, to be effective in this sense, should avoid provocation and ephemeral banalities, cyclical restyling and technological progress as an end in itself. There are shared values, such as environmental and social sustainability, which it is ridiculous and shameful to brand as idealistic in our times. But abstract hypotheses are not sufficient. These concepts need to find a way to become applicative

methodologies usable by those who design our
goods.

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