Simulacra of design in design exhibitions in São Paulo and Rome

Marc Bogo
Università "La Sapienza", Roma
marcbbogo@gmail.com

Abstract
One of the potential contributions of semiotics to design research today would be helping to investigate the social representations of the design field. A design exhibition is a situation that particularly highlights this activity, conveying images of design from both a sensitive and intellectual point of view. This research is dedicated to design shows organized by cultural institutions in two megalopolises, São Paulo and Rome, from 2013 to 2023, and its objective is to identify their distinct conceptions of design and the strategies adopted to exhibit it. The exhibitions were analyzed according to some fundamental semantic categories that constitute different strategies for presenting design: product *versus* process, segregation *versus* combination, and local *versus* foreign. The comparison between the exhibitions in the two cities allowed us to discover some recurrences, but also clear differences between them, according to the semantic values they emphasized. This led to the recognition of different simulacra of "design", representing different conceptual models of what the design activity is and how it is communicated to the public.

Keywords: Design exhibitions, Design simulacra, Cultural institutions, São Paulo and Rome, Sociosemiotics.

1. Introduction: exhibiting design[1]

One of the potential contributions of semiotics to design research today would be helping us to recognize the social significance of design itself, providing us with a better understanding of what this activity means to society. The way this professional field is presented or communicated to the public resonates with how people perceive designers and design solutions. Therefore, one way to reconsider the relationship between design and semiotics is to investigate how design is conveyed to different communities and what the social representations of design are – in short, to understand its *simulacra*.

When we look for circumstances in which design is presented or communicated to the public, one situation seems to particularly highlight this activity, conveying images of design from a sensitive and intellectual point of view: design exhibitions. A design show presents a particular vision of this activity through its enunciative choices, informing and sensitizing the public.

In recent years, several museums and cultural institutions have turned their attention to the field of design, facing the challenge of displaying this professional activity. When design objects are included in a collection and showcased in an exhibition space, they tend to lose their original practical functions and become items to be appreciated according to their formal configurations and their social significance. Therefore, to communicate a certain image of design to the public, exhibitions do not usually rely on visitors utilizing design objects but rather look for other ways of presenting this professional field. This means that curators need to come up with new criteria and strategies to select, combine and present objects, emphasizing certain characteristics of this activity. Especially when hosted by a cultural institution, a design exhibition presents a

---

curatorial and expographical proposal that results from a creative, analytical, and pedagogical intention, configuring specific ways of presenting design. The curatorial project of these shows proposes a certain understanding of the design of a given community, suggesting a particular mental model of "design" (a simulacrum).

This work is dedicated to examining the exhibition criteria used in design shows organized by cultural institutions in two major metropolises: São Paulo and Rome. It is one of the developments of an interinstitutional research[2] that semiotically compared the life practices and production of meaning in the cities of São Paulo and Rome. These are both large, multicultural, and vibrant global metropolises, with approximately 12 million and 3 million inhabitants, respectively, which makes them the most populous cities in Brazil and in Italy. Both São Paulo and Rome boast a significant number of cultural facilities, many of which have organized numerous design exhibitions during recent years.

Our objective was to identify and analyze design exhibitions organized in cultural institutions in São Paulo and Rome over the period of a decade, from 2013 to 2023. We aimed to identify, in the selection of items and in the expographic organization of the exhibitions, their different conceptions of design and the strategies adopted to exhibit it. Assuming a semiotic approach, we sought to recognize the various interpretations of design that were revealed by the significant configurations of the design shows held in these two broad cities.

2. Methodological strategy

The theoretical framework for this research is that of discursive semiotics, developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966, 1970, 1983) and his collaborators, as well as the sociosemiotics approach proposed by Eric Landowski (2006, 2017). We also rely on semiotic studies dedicated to museums and cultural institutions – Pezzini (2011, 2021), Zunzunegui (2011), Hammad (2006), Buoro et al. (2013, 2014) –, in addition to studies from the field of design investigating meaning-making processes in product design and the relationships between design and society – Cardoso (2016), Forty (1986), Norman (2003, 2010), Sudjic (2008).

We are particularly interested in two concepts from the semiotic theory. First, the notion of "semantic categories" at the fundamental level – abstract values that become more concrete when they are discursivized. In a design exhibition, the fundamental level corresponds to the level of elementary values that underlie basic curatorial and expographic criteria. These values represent the organizers' axiological investments – their approaches and standpoints. These abstract terms gradually gain concreteness as they manifest themselves on a narrative level (the sequences of changes of states shown in the exhibition) and on a discursive level (concrete figures and themes that visitors can easily recognize).

Secondly, we are interested in the notion of "simulacrum": a conceptual construction or model used to represent a certain object of study. According to Landowski (1986: 206), the term simulacrum is used "almost synonymously with 'model', and thus allows us to explicitly highlight the non-referential character of the constructions that help semioticians with analyzing certain phenomena related to the production and apprehension of meaning" (my translation). When setting up design shows, the organizers project into the exhibitions' enunciated discourses their own competences and their values, essentially their worldviews and their understandings of design, thus establishing a particular way of perceiving and

---

presenting what they conceive as design – creating a simulacrum. Simulacra, possessing a non-referential nature, are shaped by the language choices within a significant manifestation. Our initial hypothesis is that there would be some differences between the design simulacra created by exhibitions in São Paulo and Rome, indicating how the professional communities (and the inhabitants) of these two megalopolises perceive the design practice.

To test our hypothesis, we started by assembling a research *corpus*, consisting of a selection of exhibitions relevant to the study. We established a time frame of around a decade, from January 2013 to June 2023. We only took into consideration exhibitions organized in cultural institutions in the cities of São Paulo and Rome, understanding that this choice would narrow down the selection to exhibitions with a distinct curatorial intentionality and, consequently, a more explicit viewpoint on the field of design. In this research, the expression "cultural institution" refers to any museum, cultural center, or artistic-cultural organization equipped with exhibition spaces.

We compiled a list of all the design exhibitions held in cultural institutions in the two cities throughout the selected period. These exhibitions were identified through consultations of the online records maintained by cultural institutions. The fundamental selection criterion was the explicit presence of the words "design" or "designer" in the promotional texts (i.e., the exhibitions' releases). By doing so, we did not depart from a pre-existing definition of "design", but we tried instead to verify what cultural institutions in São Paulo and Rome presented as design in their exhibits. In most cases, the type of design showcased to the public fell under the category of "product design", encompassing designs for three-dimensional industrial objects. However, several of the exhibitions, when using the term "design", also included pieces from many other design specialties, such as graphic design, textile design, packaging design, and jewelry design. In total, our research *corpus* consisted of 106 exhibitions spread across 9 cultural institutions in São Paulo and 40 exhibitions spread across 7 cultural institutions in Rome.

The design exhibitions organized in São Paulo (table 1) reveal, in a certain way, the history of the development of Brazilian design. On one hand, they pay tribute to the pioneers of the national design, most of whom adhere to a rational-functionalist approach, reflecting the influence of the country's early design schools inspired by Bauhaus and Ulm curricula. On the other hand, they showcase a diverse range of projects by contemporary Brazilian and foreign designers, reflecting the country's multiculturalism. The Museu da Casa Brasileira, dedicated to architecture and design, hosted the most exhibitions during the analyzed period. Many of its exhibitions were dedicated to individual designers (such as Alexandre Wollner, Sara Rosenberg or Hugo França), but many others also managed to panoramically showcase the contemporary Brazilian design (like the various MCB Design Award exhibitions) or, even, comprehensive views of international design, mainly European (through partnerships with institutions in Italy, Spain, and other countries).

Design exhibitions in São Paulo (january 2013 – june 2023)	
Cultural institution (with number of exhibitions)	**Name of exhibitions** (with opening year)
Museu da Casa Brasileira (56 exhibitions)	"35º Prêmio Design MCB" (2022); "Esculturas Lúdicas – Sara Rosenberg" (2022); "Orgânico Sintético: Zalszupin 100 Anos" (2022); "Design e Indústria – A História da Tradicional Botica Granado" (2022); "Bernardo Figueiredo: Designer e Arquiteto Brasileiro" (2021); "Jean Gillon: Artista-Designer" (2021); "Utensílios da Cozinha Brasileira" (2019); "33º Prêmio Design Museu da Casa Brasileira + Concurso do Cartaz 2019" (2019); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro – José Zanine Caldas" (2019); "Bruno Munari: A Mudança é a Única Constante no Universo" (2019); "Instalação Chuva de Cordas" (2019); "Alex Wollner Brasil: Design Visual" (2019); "Em Cartaz: Design Gráfico para Eventos de Design" (2019); "32º Prêmio Design MCB + Concurso do Cartaz" (2018); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro – Percival Lafer" (2018); "Peconheiros" (2018); "Painel Expositivo Nossa Casa" (2018); "Indústria Artesanal – Atelier Oi" (2018); "Tipos Latinos – 8ª Bienal de Tipografia Latino-Americana" (2018); "Experimentando Le Corbusier – Interpretações Contemporâneas do Modernismo" (2018); "Design Aerodinâmico – Metáfora do Futuro" (2018); "Vivere Alla Ponti – Maneiras de Morar e Trabalhar de Gio Ponti" (2018); "Remanescentes da Mata Atlântica & Acervo MCB" (2017); "31º Prêmio Design MCB" (2017); "Cadeira Firmeza" (2017); "Diálogo Design: Polônia Brasil" (2017); "Primeiras Impressões" (2017); "Design na Aviação Brasileira" (2017); "Concurso do Cartaz 2017" (2017); "Sottsass Em Foco" (2017); "Sottsass Olivetti Synthesis" (2017); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro: Anísio Campos" (2016); "Coleção MCB – Novas Doações" (2016); "30º Prêmio Design MCB" (2016); "Projeto Balanço MCB + Boomspdesign" (2016); "Hugo França: Escalas em Contraste" (2016); "Design Mirim" (2016); "Concurso do Cartaz do MCB 2016" (2016); "Marginais Heróis" (2016); "Design Holandês Hoje: Objetos que Indicam a Casa de Amanhã" (2016); "29º Prêmio Design MCB" (2016); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro: Fulvio Nanni e Nanni Movelaria" (2015); "Tapas: Design Espanhol para Gastronomia" (2015); "Op-Art – Ilusões do Olhar" (2015); "Móvel Moderno no Brasil: Seleção do Acervo do MCB" (2015); "5ª Mostra Jovens Designers" (2015); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro: Luciano Deviá" (2014); "28º Prêmio Design MCB" (2014); "Hugo França – Resgate na Natureza" (2014); "Vespa: Um Ícone Italiano – História, Cultura e Design" (2014); "Marcas Registradas" (2014); "27º Prêmio Design MCB" (2013); "Programa Inclusão – MCB e Cecco Bacuri" (2013); "Pioneiros do Design Brasileiro: Fábio Alvim" (2013); "Bienal Ibero-Americana de Design (BID 08 10 12)" (2013); "Giugiaro: 45 Anos de Design Italiano" (2013).
Japan House (16 exhibitions)	"Design Museum Japan: Investigando o Design Japonês" (2023); "Tecnologia em Movimento por Xiborg" (2022); "Innovation In Motion" (2022); "A Arte do Ramen Donburi" (2022); "[Ím]Pares" (2022); "Sopros" (2021); "Lounge Esportivo: Tokyo 2020" (2021); "Embalagens: Designs Contemporâneos do Japão" (2021); "O Fabuloso Universo de Tomo Koizumi" (2020); "Nuno – Poéticas Têxteis Contemporâneas" (2019); "Cartazes Japoneses - 7 Mestres do Design Gráfico" (2019); "Japão 47 Artesãos" (2019); "Arquitetura para Cães" (2019); "Anrealage – A Light Un Light" (2018); "Prototyping in Tokyo - Shunji Yamanaka" (2018); "Subtle - Sutilezas em Papel" (2017).
Casa Zalszupin (9 exhibitions)	"Paisagem Interior" (2023); "Pancetti e Scapinelli" (2023); "Diálogo Bardi Bill" (2022); "Orgânico Sintético" (2022); "Afinidades Eletivas" (2022); "Semana Sim, Semana Não" (2022); "Uma Sucessão de Milagres" (2021); "Tenreiro, Contraponto Construtivo" (2021); "Ritmo. Rigor. Razão" (2021).
Instituto Bardi - Casa de Vidro (8 exhibitions)	"Rodrigo Silveira: Tipologia de uma Segunda Vida" (2021); "Jardim Suspenso" (2019); "A Casa Como Casa" (2018); "Common Sense" (2017); "O Impasse do Design – Mobiliário de Lina Bo Bardi: 1959 – 1992" (2016); "Lina em Casa: Percursos" (2015); "Lina Designer: O Mobiliário dos Tempos Pioneiros 1947 – 1958" (2014); "Casa de Vidro" (2015).
SESC - Serviço Social do Comércio (7 exhibitions)	"Bauhaus Imaginista: Aprendizados Recíprocos" (2018); "Papéis Efêmeros: Memórias Gráficas do Cotidiano" (2018); "Vkhutemas: O Futuro em Construção (1918-2018)" (2018); "Painel Dingbat Cobogó" (2018); "Todo Poder Ao Povo! Emory Douglas e os Panteras Negras" (2017); "Abridores de Letras de Pernambuco" (2016); "Túnel do Tempo do Design Gráfico Brasileiro" (2014).
Itaú Cultural (4 exhibitions)	"Geraldo de Barros – Imaginário, Construção e Memória" (2021); "Ser Estar – Sérgio Rodrigues" (2018); "Cidade Gráfica" (2014); "Ocupação Aloísio Magalhães" (2014).
Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP (3 exhibitions)	"Art Déco Brasileiro: Doação Fulvia e Adolpho Leirner" (2022); "Visualidade Nascente: Artes Visuais, Audiovisual, Design" (2017); "Depero Futurista e Artista Global" (2016).
Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (2 exhibitions)	"A Máquina do Mundo: Arte e Indústria no Brasil 1901 – 2021" (2021); "100 Anos de Produção Gráfica e Editorial" (2013).
Museu da Língua Portuguesa (1 exhibitions)	"Caixa de Letras" (2015).
Total: 106 exhibitions distributed in 9 cultural institutions.	

Table 1 – Design exhibitions in São Paulo.
Source: author.

Design exhibitions in Rome (table 2) are typically hosted in multidisciplinary venues such as MAXXI (Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo) and MACRO (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma), spaces that often encourage the intersection of design with other creative fields like art and architecture. That kind of approach, which mixes disciplines, seems to confirm some of the most recognized characteristics of Italian design: inventiveness and plastic exploration. This approach is linked to the origins of Italian design, which results from the experimentation of entrepreneurs and manufacturing associations who sought to improve their products by drawing from the traditions of artisanal crafts and decorative arts. Among our research findings, MAXXI, a museum primarily focused on art and architecture that also has a specific curatorial program on design, stands out in terms of the number of exhibitions. Many of them feature experimental design projects developed *ad hoc*, sometimes in collaboration with Italian companies.

Design exhibitions in Rome (january 2013 – june 2023)	
Cultural institution (with number of exhibitions)	**Name of exhibitions** (with opening year)
MAXXI - Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo (16 exhibitions)	"Technoscape – L'Architettura dell'Ingegneria" (2022); "Le Icone del Design al Cinema. Italia 1960 – 1990" (2022); "Casa Balla: Dalla Casa all'Universo e Ritorno + Casa Balla" (2021); "Casa Mondo" (2020); "Gio Ponti: Amare l'Architettura + Amare Gio Ponti" (2019); "Formafantasma. Nervi in the Making" (2019); "Michele De Lucchi. L'Anello Mancante" (2018); "Nanda Vigo. Arch/Arcology" (2018); "Corpo Movimento Struttura. Il Gioiello Contemporaneo e la sua Costruzione" (2017); "Interiors. Le Stanze del Quotidiano" (2017); "Local Icons. Urban Landscapes / North-South" (2017); "Superstudio 50" (2016); "Local Icons. East/West" (2016); "Local Icons. Greetings From Rome" (2015); "Lina Bo Bardi in Italia. 'Quello Che Volevo, Era Avere Storia'" (2014); "Playful Inter-Action" (2013).
Casa dell'Architettura (9 exhibitions)	"ADI Design Index 2020" (2021); "ADI Design Index 2019" (2019); "ADI Design Index 2018" (2018); "ADI Design Index 2017" (2017); "Le Donne nel Mondo dell'Architettura e del Design" (2017); "Futuro Anteriore. Il Design di Roberto Fallani" (2014); "Magutdesign Social Hub" (2013); "Green Yacht Design" (2013); "Carlo De Carli. Lo Spazio Primario" (2013).
MACRO - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma (7 exhibitions)	"Studio Temp - Tempus Fugit" (2023); "Åbäke - Deep Publishing" (2022); "Julia Born - All Capitals" (2022); "Goda Budvytytė - Touch, Colour and Fold" (2022); "Vier5 - Win a New Car" (2021); "Julie Peeters – Daybed" (2021); "Boy Vereecken - Back Matter" (2021).
Palazzo delle Esposizioni (5 exhibitions)	"Toccare la Bellezza. Maria Montessori, Bruno Munari" (2021); "Tra Munari e Rodari" (2020); "Human+. Il Futuro della Nostra Specie" (2018); "Una Dolce Vita? Dal Liberty al Design Italiano. 1900-1940" (2015); "I Nostri Anni '70. Libri per Ragazzi in Italia" (2014).
Palazzo Piacentini (1 exhibition)	"Italia Geniale. Design Enables" (2022).
Museo Carlo Bilotti Aranciera di Villa Borghese (1 exhibition)	"Markku Piri. Vetro & Dipinti" (2017).
Instituto Cervantes di Roma (1 exhibition)	"Letras & Marcas. Calligrafia & Branding - Ricardo Rousselot" (2018).
Total: 40 exhibitions distributed in 7 cultural institutions.	

Table 2 – Design exhibitions in Rome.
Source: author.

After identifying and listing the *corpus*, the next phase of the investigation involved visits and on-site observation of several design exhibitions in São Paulo and Rome, as well as the collection of materials from exhibitions held throughout the entire reference period (photographs, catalogues, media articles, audiovisual records etc.). The exhibitions were then analyzed based on the collected material, with a specific focus on the curatorial strategies in play, including the selection and arrangement of objects and elements on display. The analysis

led us to determine some fundamental semantic categories for organizing design exhibitions, which, in turn, allowed us to find general similarities and differences between the exhibitions in the two cities, indicating what conceptions of design are being brought to the public by cultural institutions in São Paulo and Rome.

3. Analyzing design exhibitions through semantic categories

The notion of a semantic category comes from Saussure's proposal that meaning emerges from differences. As Greimas (1966: 19) argues, "we perceive differences, and thanks to this perception, the world 'takes shape' before us and for us" (my translation). This implies the existence of two opposing terms-objects always simultaneously present in the production of meaning, constituting an elementary and abstract level of any significant manifestation.

In fact, each semantic category includes not only a pair of opposing terms, but also their logical denials. Thus, a semantic category is formed not only by a term "A" in opposition to another term "B", but by its contradictions "not-A" and "not-B" as well. These terms are called "subcontraries", and they tend to represent less stable semantic positions, since they are situated in the passages between one term and another. Therefore, a semantic category always encompasses at least four different terms-objects, resulting in the logical-semantic model known as "semiotic square".

The terms of the semiotic square can be axiologized based on the projection of the thymic category euphoria *vs.* dysphoria, a kind of "primitive", proprioceptive category. Thus, the fundamental structures become systems of values that each significant manifestation presents either as euphoric or dysphoric. In a design exhibition, semantic categories represent different fundamental values adopted in the organization of the shows, receiving positive or negative axiologization according to the curatorial point of views.

In our study, the constitution of semantic categories was based on two principles: (1) reiteration and (2) distinctiveness. "Reiteration" refers to the recurrence of semantic axes, indicating that the observed categories were repeatedly identified as relevant criteria used in the organization of design exhibitions. "Distinctiveness" refers to how useful these categories were in differentiating and comparing exhibits, providing a key to identifying differences between the exhibitions covered by the research. Taking these two principles into consideration, when observing our *corpus* of design shows, we were able to determine some general semantic categories that constituted principles for analyzing the exhibitions: product *vs.* process, segregation *vs.* combination, and local *vs.* foreign.

Based on these categories (presented in the form of semiotic squares), we have distributed the design exhibitions according to their semantic predominance, that is, according to the terms that each exhibition presented mostly as positive (euphoric). We use the word "predominance" because an exhibition can employ more than one curatorial strategy, often organizing them syntagmatically in successive spaces along the visiting circuit. This categorization allowed us to identify general patterns of curatorial-expographic strategies adopted by cultural institutions in São Paulo and Rome. Let's examine each of these categories.

3.1. Product *vs.* process

In the field of design, this activity is commonly associated to the idea of an organized process, implying that design practice is often seen as a systematically organized sequence of stages or steps. The emphasis on this systematic procedural approach is a recurring theme in design education and research. This perspective extends to the organization of several design exhibitions, where the opposition of process *versus* product revolves around showcasing the design process of objects or presenting the finished products by themselves. Highlighting the creative process brings the designer's methodological practice into discussion, while focusing

on the finished products can emphasize their aesthetical solutions or the historical context of a certain group of objects. By framing the category "product" *versus* "process" within the logical structure of the semiotic square, we can also identify the subcontrary terms "experimentation" (denial of the systematic "process") and "system" (denial of the finished "product").
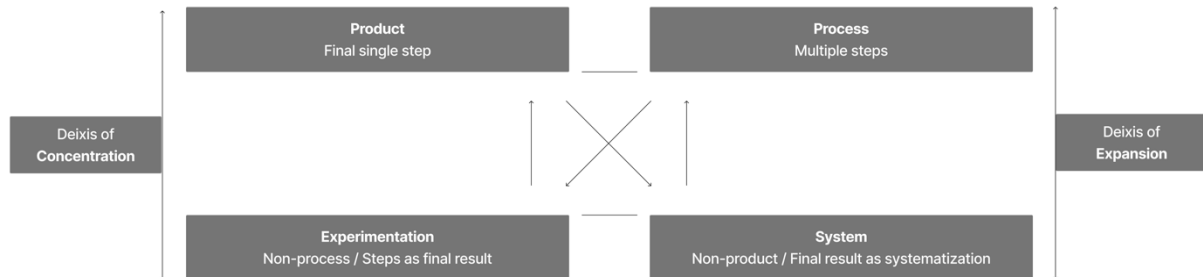

Figure 1 – Category product *vs.* process.
Source: author.

In exhibitions that emphasize the term "product", the strategy at play is to highlight the outcome of a design project, particularly its ultimate aesthetic and formal solution. This strategy is quite common in exhibitions dedicated to award-winning projects, such as the Design Award shows at Museu da Casa Brasileira or the ADI Design Index exhibitions at Casa dell'Architettura, which all display finished objects. Furthermore, this emphasis on the "product" is observed in exhibitions that feature a series of works from a specific country (panoramic displays of projects from Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, etc.) or from a particular historical period (shows dedicated to futurism, *art déco*, liberty, etc.).

Contrarily, the emphasis on the "process" involves showcasing phases of the development of a design project, through the presentation of sketches, technical drawings, three-dimensional models (mockups), etc. Or even showing written narratives, photos, and videos that document the conception process of the objects. For example, the exhibition dedicated to designer Bernardo Figueiredo at the Museu da Casa Brasileira showcased sketches, production drawings, verbal notes, material samples (wood used in his furniture pieces), a disassembled furniture item, and a video demonstrating the manufacture of an armchair. In short, the exhibition displayed various stages of the design process, including research, ideation, technical detailing, material selection, production monitoring, and more, ultimately leading to the final stage – the finished product. Apart from monographic exhibitions focusing on a designer's process, student exhibitions also tend to prioritize the "process" by showcasing prototypes and ideation drawings, rather than industrially manufactured products.

In contradiction to the emphasis on the process, "experimentation" strategy doesn't focus on systematically progressing towards a final objective. Instead, this type of exhibition showcases non-teleological experiments with forms, production techniques, and materials – experimental practices that curators find interesting enough to present to the public. Therefore, these exhibitions display printing tests, plastic experiments with certain materials, or even experimentations with the shape of certain objects (for example, when designer Sara Rosenberg tried to replicate the structure of a ginger, and her tests were exhibited at the Museu da Casa Brasileira). The idea, in these cases, is that the plastic study could already be aesthetically appreciated by the public, without the need of necessarily arriving at a final object or design solution.

Finally, in contradiction to the product-oriented approach, we encounter a position we refer to as "system": in these cases, there is no tangible product representing the conclusion of a design process, but what is on display are guidelines and parameters that facilitate the creation of new

products. This happens, for example, when an exhibition displays a brand book, a graphic design manual or the construction grids for a signage system – design elements that will be used in the construction of new graphic pieces. A design system allows the development of new projects based on common foundations (design parameters and guidelines). An example of this category is the exhibition "Cadeira Firmeza" at the Museu da Casa Brasileira, which showed an assistive design system for chairs developed according to the body type and special needs of each user. Thus, what was exhibited was an explanation of the construction system for these chairs (their guidelines), rather than the individually designed chairs (the products actually manufactured).

When we distribute the design exhibitions of São Paulo and Rome into these categories, based on their predominant strategies, we find some recurrences and some differences between the shows in the two cities. In the figure below, red cards indicate São Paulo exhibitions, and yellow cards represent Roman exhibitions.
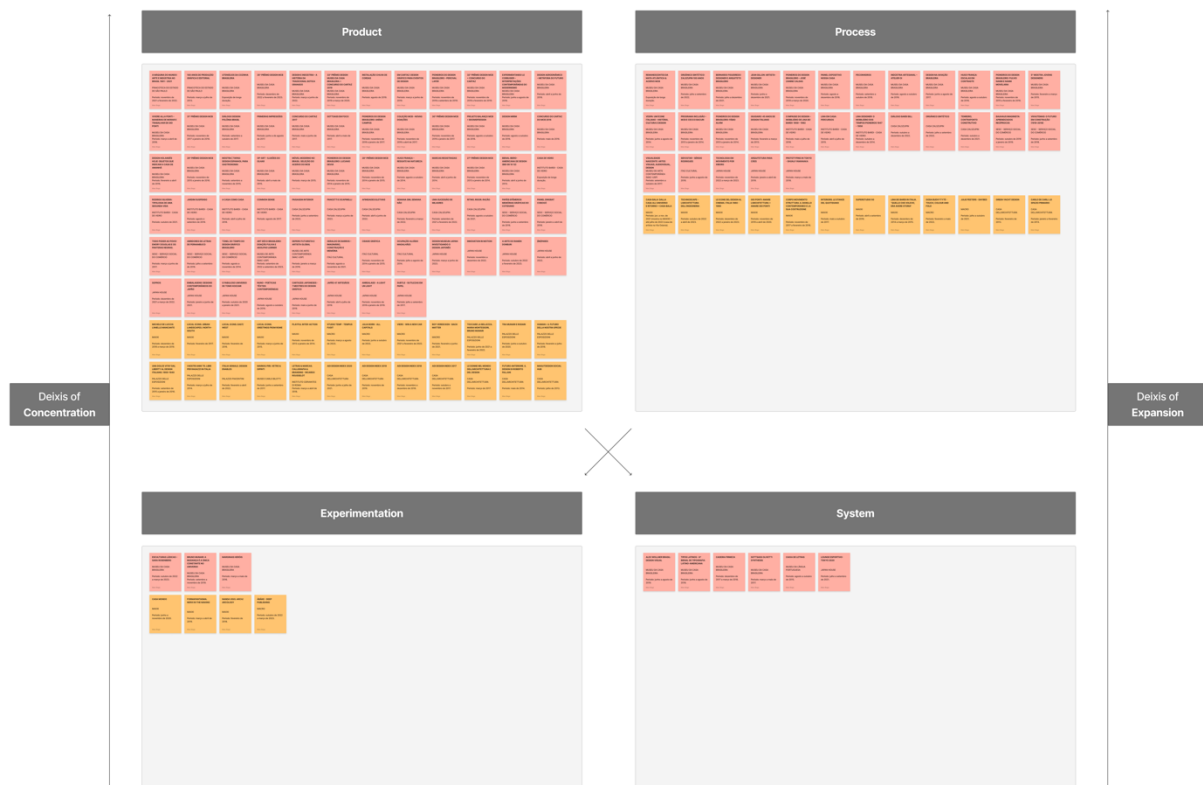

Figure 2 – Distribution of exhibitions according to category product *vs.* process.
Source: author.

Both São Paulo and Rome have a much greater number of exhibitions focusing on finished "products" than those emphasizing the design "process". From a semiotic point of view, the general meaning effect is that of valuing the aesthetic-formal solutions achieved by the designers, more than the unfolding of the different design stages.

A significant difference, however, lies in the axis of subcontrary terms: while several exhibitions in Rome value "experimentation" (in a higher percentage than those in São Paulo), only in São Paulo can we find examples of exhibitions focused on the "system", displaying brand manuals, iconographic system guidelines, etc. This difference reinforces the perception that, historically, Brazilian design was developed according to a rationalist and systematic

tradition, while Italian design was influenced by practical experimentation based on artisanal tradition and local manufacturing associations.

3.2. Segregation *vs.* combination

Whether in theoretical, professional, or academic contexts, the relationships between the professional field of design and other creative activities, such as architecture or artisanal crafts, are constantly under debate. In design exhibitions, the category of segregation *versus* combination of disciplines concerns the difference between exhibiting design "by itself", claiming its specificity as an autonomous field (as is the case in a design award, for example, where there is a "screening" of what is considered design, or more precisely, "good design"), and combining design with other creative fields (visual arts, architecture, crafts, etc.). To analyze this category, we rely on a semiotic square that presents ways of conducting scientific research according to relationships between disciplines, consisting of the opposing terms "segregation" and "combination", as well as the subcontrary terms "comparison" and "undifferentiation".
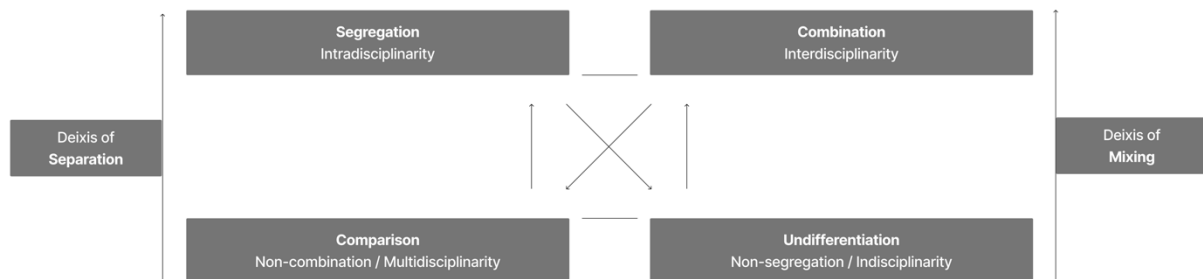

Figure 3 – Category segregation *vs.* combination.
Source: adapted from Bogo and Clemente (2021).

"Segregation" concerns the precise delineation of an area of activity, distinguishing one domain from another, and characterizing each discipline by its unique features. This is evident in design awards or exhibitions highlighting specific design specialties (such as packaging or jewelry), all of which aim to identify and value a specific professional field, drawing its boundaries within a broader social context. Another common scenario is when an exhibition is dedicated to a creator identified as a designer, whose pieces are explicitly presented as design objects, without any mixing with other adjacent disciplines. In this type of exhibition, the strategy adopted aligns closely with the concept of "intradisciplinarity" – meaning the consolidation of a discipline through the affirmation of its particularities and idiosyncrasies.

Its opposite term, "combination", is associated with the idea of interdisciplinarity. This approach is evident when design exhibitions explicitly mix this activity with other creative practices. For example, in exhibitions dedicated to interdisciplinary creators such as an "architect-designer" (Lina Bo Bardi, Bernardo Figueiredo, Giò Ponti, etc.) or an "artist-designer" (Bruno Munari, Roberto Fallani, Aloísio Magalhães, etc.). The strategy of combination is also at play when designers collaborate with other professionals (engineers, artists, photographers, etc.) on a same project exhibited in cultural institutions, or even when an exhibition is dedicated to a unique aesthetic movement that crosses different types of objects, as seen in exhibitions dedicated to Brazilian *art déco* or Italian *liberty* style.

In contradiction to the idea of combination, the term "comparison" concerns a strategy characterized by multidisciplinarity, in which different creative activities are juxtaposed. This strategy can be seen in exhibitions that put disciplines side by side rather than together. For example, in the exhibition "Op Art – illusions of the gaze" at the Museu da Casa Brasileira,

objects were organized along exhibition axes such as "graphic design, furniture, and objects", "art", and "fashion, cinema, and advertising", thus allowing visitors to make comparative interpretations and to observe how each creative practice responds to the common theme of optical illusions. Similarly, this strategy is employed in exhibitions where design pieces, explicitly identified as such, are displayed in contrast to pieces from another creative field, highlighting the distinctions between disciplines. An example is the exhibition "Body, movement, structure – contemporary jewelry and its construction", held at MAXXI, which compared jewelry design and architecture.

Finally, the strategy of "undifferentiation" entails the non-segregation between disciplines and is linked to the idea of "indisciplinarity". Exhibitions that employ this organizational logic reject the boundaries between professional fields, subverting the separations established by tradition. This strategy can be observed when a designer is tasked with creating a work traditionally associated with another creative field, such as developing an artistic installation (and therefore "invading" the art field). An example of the undifferentiation approach can be found in the exhibition space "In-Design", at the MACRO contemporary art museum, where graphic designers are invited to propose site-specific installations that align with the language and logic of artistic installations. Another example is when everyday objects that were created by artists or craftsmen, like the domestic objects made by Giacomo Balla, are presented by the curator as design pieces or as objects of particular interest to the design field.
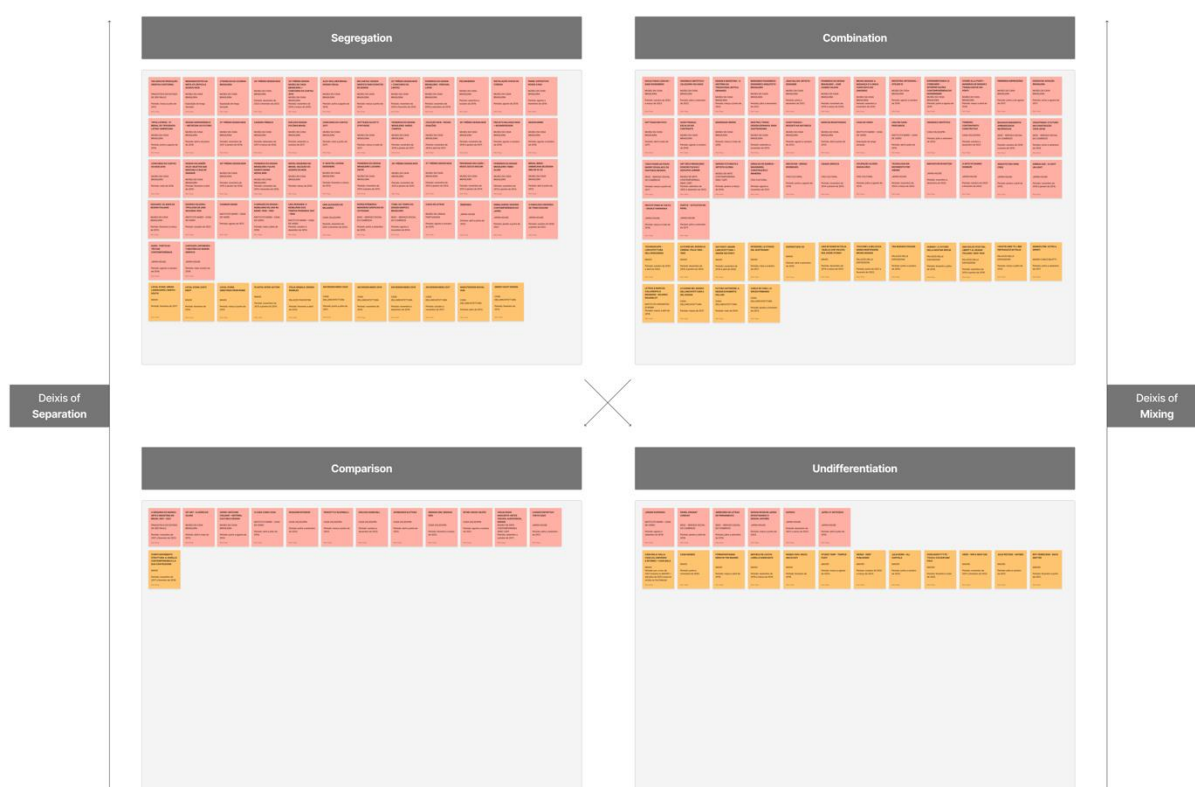

Figure 4 – Distribution of exhibitions according to category segregation *vs.* combination.
Source: author.

Observing the distribution of the exhibitions in our *corpus* (once again, red cards represent shows in São Paulo, while yellow cards represent shows in Rome), we can see that those in São Paulo are more frequently positioned under the deixis of separation, whereas those in Rome are mostly positioned under the deixis of mixing.

In São Paulo, this is mainly due to the numerous exhibitions organized by the Museu da Casa Brasileira exclusively focused on the works of designers or on design awards, such as the many editions of the MCB Design Award. Additionally, many exhibitions in São Paulo organized by Casa Zalszupin compare the production of designers to the production of artists (mostly painters and sculptors), contributing to the high occurrence of the "comparison" category. This high incidence of the deixis of separation in São Paulo could be explained in two ways. On one hand, the aforementioned museums are explicitly dedicated to design, presenting this professional activity to the public in a clear manner that stands out from other fields. On the other hand, design is still considered a relatively novel and frequently misunderstood activity among the Brazilian population, so that these exhibitions may serve a pedagogical purpose, clearly presenting this creative field while avoiding confusion with other professions.

In Rome, the fact that most exhibitions are interdisciplinary combinations or "indisciplinary" transgressions is probably explained by the absence of a museum exclusively dedicated to design in the city, with design exhibitions often organized in institutions dedicated to the arts and architecture. Consequently, in Roman cultural institutions, design frequently appears in mixing operations.

3.3. Local *vs.* foreign

When a cultural institution showcases design objects, it emphasizes their participation in the history of a society and in its material and graphic culture, as well as their connection to a national identity. In design exhibitions, this topic translates into the semantic axis of local *versus* foreign, reflecting the idea of national or regional identity in contrast to its alterity – meaning other countries and social contexts. While several design exhibitions and museums focus on the local context and the works of national designers, other institutions and exhibitions prioritize showcasing design developed in foreign countries, fostering multicultural (and cosmopolitan) dialogues. Based on the opposition between identity and alterity, taken here as structuring axes, we have constructed a typology formed by the opposite terms "local" and "foreign", complemented by the subcontrary terms "import" and "export".
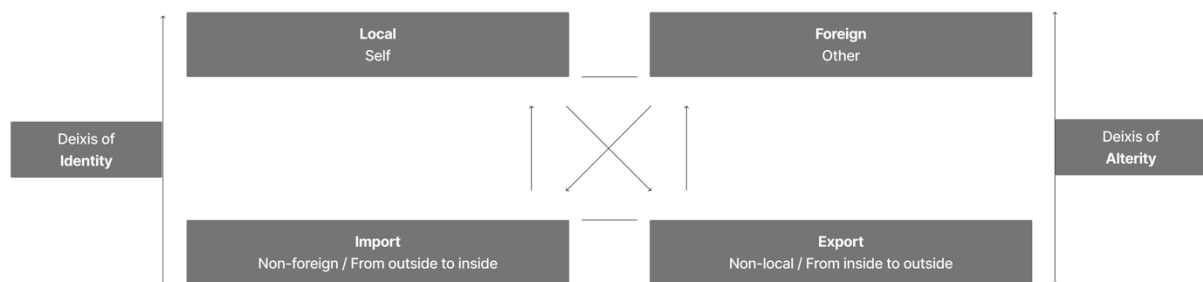

Figure 5 – Category local *vs.* foreign.
Source: author.

"Local" refers to design exhibitions that display projects from within the country, either in a delimited way by focusing on the work of a particular national designer, or in a panoramic way – such as the Design Award exhibitions at the Museu da Casa Brasileira, which present a broad view of design production in Brazil, or the "Italia Geniale" exhibition at Palazzo Piacentini, that showcased a panoramic view of Italian design.

"Foreign" refers to exhibitions that, even though realized in a country, focus on the design of another nation. For example, the exhibitions on Dutch or Spanish design shown at the Museu da Casa Brasileira, or a large part of the exhibitions at Japan House in São Paulo dedicated to

Japanese design. In these exhibitions, projects usually undergo processes of translation and resignification to be presented in a new cultural-geographical context.

Denying the "foreign" involves a movement from outside to inside, indicating a transition from foreign to local – a form of "import". In this case, we are talking about foreign designers who become integrated into the local reality, working on design projects situated in the host country. An example is the "In-Design" space at MACRO in Rome, which frequently invites foreign designers (from the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, Lithuania, Belgium) to propose specific installations for the museum's exhibition room. These designers are encouraged to embrace local aspects into their projects, and several of them included Italian cultural elements in their exhibitions, such as graphic pieces printed in Venice or photographs of graffiti from Rome. In short, in the "import" strategy there is a reception or welcoming of the others in a local context, representing a movement "from outside to inside".

Denying the "local" involves a movement from inside to outside, indicating a passage from local to foreign – a form of "export". This occurs when local designers seek inspiration "outside" to develop their projects, considering creative guidelines and inputs that come from a foreign context. This could involve the participation of local designers in an international design project, or the contribution of a national designer to a project dedicated to foreign creators or foreign contexts (for example, the exhibition "Experimenting Le Corbusier: contemporary interpretations of modernism" showcased Brazilian pieces inspired by the work of the Swiss artist and architect). In both cases, the movement represents an opening up to a foreign scenario, "from inside to outside".
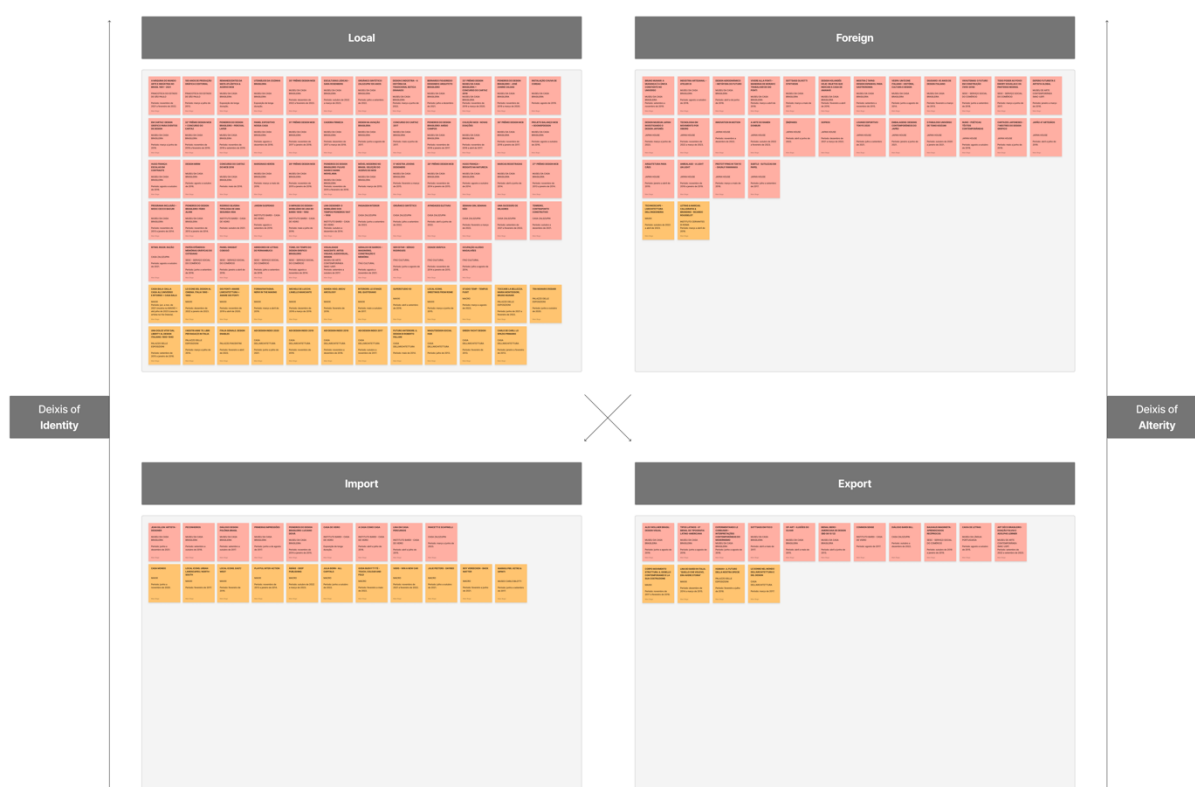

Figure 6 – Distribution of exhibitions according to category local *vs.* foreign.
Source: author.

Once again, we observe the distribution of exhibitions in São Paulo and Rome based on their predominant curatorial strategies. A notable recurrence is the prevalence of exhibitions focused

on "local" design in both cities. It is well known that governments and marketing have long realized the potential of material culture in reinforcing local identity – consider, for example, the strength of the "Made in Italy" label. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a large part of the exhibitions is dedicated to design objects from within each country.

Among the differences, a most significant one is the relatively large number of exhibitions organized in São Paulo dedicated to foreign design, with shows focused on Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Swiss, North American, and primarily Japanese design, largely thanks to the various exhibitions organized by Japan House, a cultural institution dedicated to the Japanese community. This outcome reinforces the multiculturalism of Brazilian design and the cosmopolitan nature of São Paulo.

Another relevant difference is the high number of exhibitions in Rome, proportionally, adopting the "import" strategy – meaning they host foreign designers in their cultural institutions, as long as they engage in local initiatives and develop projects based on the suggestions and guidelines of Roman curators.

4. Design simulacra in São Paulo and Rome

In this research, we have identified some logical-semantic categories that allowed us to systematize a large *corpus* of design exhibitions. Our results do not provide a comprehensive overview of Italian or Brazilian design, but rather offer insights into the specific approaches to design presented by cultural institutions in the biggest cities of these countries. Comparing a substantial number of exhibitions has revealed both recurrences and clear differences between the shows organized in São Paulo and Rome.

Regarding the recurrences, both cities featured a greater number of exhibitions focusing on finished products (instead of emphasizing the design process) and highlighting design created within the country (showing local design, rather than foreign design). In these cases, exhibiting design is perceived not only as an opportunity to display plastic and aesthetic solutions, but also as a strategy for valuing local identities.

However, some key differences were: (1) while Rome hosts many exhibitions that value plastic "experimentation", it is only in São Paulo that we find exhibitions specifically focused on the "system" – sets of guidelines facilitating the development of new design projects; (2) whereas exhibitions in Rome primarily employ the strategy of mixing, combining various disciplines and creative fields, exhibitions in São Paulo more frequently adopt the strategy of separation, drawing precise boundaries to the field of design; (3) in Rome, many exhibitions follow the "import" strategy, inviting foreign designers to participate in local initiatives and develop *ad hoc* projects following the instructions of Roman curators, whereas in São Paulo there are several exhibitions dedicated to "foreign" design, showing works from Japan, Spain, the Netherlands, etc. These differences reveal distinctive understandings of the design field and, more specifically, convey different images of the design activity to the public.

5. Conclusion: design exhibitions as sociopolitical strategies

We have addressed different representations of design practices by identifying meaning-making processes in various design exhibitions, all contextually inscribed in the societies that host them. Based on certain choices, certain ways of enunciating, the curators of design exhibitions project something of themselves and their cultures into the exhibitions – conveying their values and visions of the design field. The selection, combination, and presentation of design objects indicate that curators not only appreciate certain designers or design projects, positively sanctioning them, but also uphold a strategic vision of how this creative activity should be socially perceived.

Communicating a specific image of the design activity to the public involves strategic choices. Should design be portrayed as an authentic national symbol, or as a bastion of cosmopolitanism? Do we want to emphasize the specialized professionalization of design, or the interdisciplinary competence of creators? Do we want to value the aesthetic refinement and plastic beauty of designed objects, or the strategic intelligence applied in the systematization of the creative process? There is no singular correct answer, only different approaches. Curatorial practices imply political and social choices, especially because they represent different strategies for illuminating design as part of a society's material and immaterial heritage. A semiotic approach to design exhibitions aids in better understanding what strategies are being used, but also in exploring alternative possibilities for communicating specific values and characteristic of design to the visiting public.

References

BOGO, M. B. and CLEMENTE, M. B. (2021), "Greimas' semiotics in design and fashion research in Brazil: separation and mixing between disciplines" in *REAMD,* v. 5, no. 1, pp. 314-320.

BUORO, A. B. et al. (2013), "Dinâmicas sociais nos territórios de culturas de São Paulo" in *Caderno de Discussão do Centro de Pesquisas Sociossemióticas,* no. 19.

BUORO, A. B. et al. (2014), "Relações contratuais e relações polêmicas nos territórios de cultura" in OLIVEIRA, Ana Claudia [Org.], *São Paulo público & privado: abordagem sociossemiótica*. São Paulo, Estação das Letras e Cores/CPS Editora, pp. 133-150.

CARDOSO, R. (2016), *Design para um mundo complexo,* São Paulo, Ubu Editora.

FORTY, A. (1986), *Objects of desire,* New York, Panthen Books.

GREIMAS, A. J.(1966), *Sémantique structurale*, Paris, Larousse.

GREIMAS, A. J. (1970), *Du sens*, Paris, Seuil.

GREIMAS, A. J. (1983), *Du sens II*, Paris, Seuil.

HAMMAD, M. (2006), "Il Museo della Centrale Montemartini" in PEZINI, Isabella and CERVELLI, P. [Orgs.], *Scene del consumo: dallo shopping al museo*, Roma, Meltemi, pp. 203-280.

LANDOWSKI, E. (1986), "Simulacre" in GREIMAS, Algirdas Julien and COURTÉS, Joseph, *Sémiotique – Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage: Tome 2: compléments, débats, propositions*, Paris, Hachette, p. 206.

LANDOWSKI, E. (2006), *Les interactions risquées,* Limoges, PULIM.

LANDOWSKI, E. (2017), *Com Greimas: interações semióticas*, São Paulo, Estação das Letras e Cores/Centro de Pesquisas Sociossemióticas.

NORMAN, D. (2003), *Emotional design: why we love (or hate) everyday things*, New York, Basic Books.

NORMAN, D. (2010), *Living with complexity*, Cambridge, The MIT Press.

OLIVEIRA, A.C. (2017) [Org.], *São Paulo e Roma: práticas de vida e sentido*, São Paulo, Estação das Letras e Cores/Centro de Pesquisas Sociossemióticas.

PEZZINI, I. (2011), *Semiotica dei nuovi musei*, Bari-Roma, Laterza.

PEZZINI, I. (2021), "Modelli semiotici per lo studio del museo" in MARSCIANI, Francesco [Org.], *Un etnosemiologo nel museo*, Bolonha, Esculapio, pp. 115-134.

SUDJIC, D. (2008), *The language of things*, London, Allen Lane.

ZUNZUNEGUI, S. (2011), *Metamorfosi dello sguardo: museo e semiotica* [italian edition], Roma, Nuova Cultura.