From analog to digital: the archive of Enzo Mari as a case study

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The discipline of the Digital Humanities (DH) has important implications when considering the process of conservation and the enhancement of cultural heritage: as a matter of fact, it can be the starting point of projects aiming to present and disseminate the immeasurable number of documents that bear witness to the history of a community, preserved by institutions such as museums and archives.

In the last few years, the concept of archives has been enriched with multiple meanings thanks to new opportunities and methods offered by the digital, which also posed unprecedented challenges to the interpretation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

Moving away from a vision in which digitised documents were considered only in relation to their quantity, research is now putting significant effort into the chance to access knowledge structured around the data linked to these same documents: this process has been made possible by the incessant and rapid development of technologies applied to the management of this data.

The digital archive goes beyond the bounds of old archival traditions, merely based on its physical structure, to enter a new dimension, in which sources and archives can enter dialogue and interact with each other in order to build a network of narratives between different archival collections. The databases hosting and preserving these collections can no longer be considered an inpenetrable container, but rather elements of a discourse that can be used to originate various paths and reflections.

This significant improvement, which took place with the transition from analog to digital, allows an increase in the various possibilities of access, keys to reading, exchange and accumulation of data, with a view to a renewed approach to sources. Their online availability is the primary condition to the production of original content, which can use the chance to expand the documentary basin through the connections of local data with other sources available on the network, favouring a continuous growth of knowledge, both in the specialist field and in informative contexts.

Between 2019 and 2022 I worked on the archive of Enzo Mari (1932–2020), preserved at Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (Study Centre and Communication Archive, CSAC) of the University of Parma (Italy), as the basis of my doctoral thesis: the project, funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region, is linked to

the theme "Design Archives: New Creative and Narrative Forms for Sharing Memory".

The CSAC of the University of Parma consists of five sections – Fine Art, Photography, Media, Project, and Visual Arts – collecting and preserving twelve million documents of heterogeneous kinds. Amongst this immense amount, the archive of Enzo Mari, belonging to the Project Section, was chosen as a case study: it preserves 8352 documents, 3 artworks and 68 objects and prototypes.

My PhD addressed three fundamental issues: firstly, the accessibility of archives for study and dissemination purposes; then Enzo Mari, his work, his conception of design practice, his self-narration and the space of the maker or *faber*; finally, the fragmentation of archives and their reunion through digital projects.

The aim of the dissertation is the development of a programme for the description and annotation of the digitisation activities of the archive and the dissemination of contents towards different users: a prototype of a website was therefore created, allowing the study and the disclosure of cultural heritage, combining the actions of preservation, re-signification and transmission of those documents.

Through a campaign based on the collection and analysis of national and international case studies[1] –experiences that conservation institutions such as museums and archives have been implementing for several years – I was able to define a framework of possibilities in order to understand the technological developments and advances in this field and to be able to define a coherent hypothesis. The research proposed a reflection and a contribution to the development of innovative solutions to support cultural heritage, soliciting enhancements and developing new ways of interacting with the contents preserved in the archives.

For this work, I combined two different kinds of skills: on the one hand, the capability of historical and critical analysis of documents related to the field of the project – in the awareness of their materiality and morphology – and, on the other hand, the acquisition of skills to implement digital archives and platforms to be used in the construction of forms of narration and dissemination of cultural heritage.

The entire digitisation process was developed with the collaboration of Italian company Hyperborea: an attempt was made to propose an innovative solution to support the dissemination of Mari's cultural heritage, with the purposes

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[1] Websites: http://www5.iuav.it/homepage/webgraphics/IUAV-PAGINE.INTERNE/IUAV-MOSTREONLINE/petit-tour.htm; http://www.archiviocarloscarpa.it/index.php?lingua=i; https://archividigitaliolivetti.archiviostoricolivetti.it; http://www.fondoaschieri.org; https://www.mart.tn.it/; http://www.michelucci.it; https://archivio.vicomagistretti.it/magistretti/.

of urging its more significant valorisation, and developing new ways of interacting with the contents of which this important archive is a precious custodian. To achieve this goal, a significant amount of the documents of the Enzo Mari archive stored at CSAC were made accessible through Arianna, a software for the archival document management developed by Hyperborea: there are currently 4711 archival units online, collected in 208 projects.

The main sources of investigation for the research on Mari were the documents attesting his activity as artist and designer preserved both at CSAC and in his studio/archive in Milan. The study of the collection is conducted in function of the virtual restitution of his work that takes due account of all these specificities. The portal prototype was developed with Hyperborea, which helped with the creation of the content management system, using WordPress.

In his sixty-year career, the author developed about 2000 projects. Starting from artistic studies, he went through various artistic currents of the twentieth century, between Concrete Art and Programmed Art. In the second half of the 1950s he began his career as a designer, working closely with selected and enlightened clients: together with Bruno Munari he made the fortune of Italian firm Danese, realising about 100 projects; he worked, among other companies, with Bompiani, Boringhieri, Driade, Artemide and Anonima Castelli, to name a few. At the end of the 1960s, when Italy was facing a long period of social protest, he began to produce Allegories, which were works of strong value and ethical meaning. The notion of ethics crossed every aspect of his work: his attempt was to make users aware of the meaning of any project. Each produced object avoids fashions and clearly denounces its genesis and its meaning.

During the visits to his studio in Milan, I was impressed by the meticulousness with which Mari managed his activity: through archival journals (*libri maestro*) and handwritten cards (*schede*), it is possible to identify each project and the location of its documents in the studio, from sketches to prototypes and objects.

An equally precise work was set by Mari for the donations of documents from his archive to CSAC, between the 1970s and 1980s, which the designer followed personally with the assistance of professor Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, then director of the centre, and Simona Riva, art historian and archivist. His presence was important because he attended to the construction of his image. For the donation, the author created a form (*scheda di donazione*) for each project, an essential tool for reorganising the archive, which then allowed me to work on the description of the individual archival units and enhance the design and archiving method.

The idea underpinning the research starts from the arrangements of the projects' materials as they first arrived at CSAC, thanks to these forms, to then be able to work on the detailed description of the archival units. Parallel to the work in Parma, I conducted a study on the documents preserved in Milan, especially

photographs and objects. An important issue on which I have focused my attention concerns the titles of his projects: it is very interesting to read in his bibliography a great variety of these, very often changing over the years, depending on the image that Mari wanted to leave. It is therefore necessary to restore his order as faithfully as possible, in order to make available not only his production but also his method.

For the reproductions of part of the background materials, I experimented with ScanTent, a device consisting of a curtain lit from above that allows you to create high-resolution reproductions with the use of a mobile phone through the DocScan app, both developed as part of the READ project by members of the Computer Vision Laboratory of the Technical University of Vienna and the Digitisation and Digital Preservation Group of the University of Innsbruck.

The portal, published in March 2022, collects monographic studies on Mari's heritage: the intent to enhance the materials that the designer has produced over the course of his long career, providing users with a tool that can bring them closer to his complex figure, is conducted through the creation of project files, narrations of the studio/archive space, paths among archival documents. The portal allows the user to view individual works and navigate through Mari's research categories and thematic itineraries based on the selection and combination of several works. The author's biography has been presented not as a sequence of activities and events but as a reading of the evolution of his reasoning: a global project that considers the continuity between art, design and politics. Some of his works have also been critically investigated starting from the most important source produced to date, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle's monograph *Enzo Mari*, where a first attempt at historicisation was attempted in order to construct a critical bibliography.

Central to this research work has been considering Mari's studio in Milan both as a place and a process to be described and preserved, because it is going to be dismantled due to the author's own will. The digital platform reflects also on the spatial dimension of the conservation of his heritage

The revitalisation of the structure of the donation made by the author to CSAC, in which every step of his project has been reconstructed, has made it possible to appreciate Mari's decision process which, in the delicate exercise of consulting archive materials, risks have not being entirely assessed; furthermore, an online ordering that takes into account the first form assumed by the materials that arrived in Parma may be useful in all those cases of ambiguity, in which the documents have been disarranged.

All the materials contained in this thesis, reworked, in some cases expanded and in others summarized, have been brought together in the prototype created as an output that accompanies the thesis, which was configured thanks to the study and comparison with the tools developed by some conservation institutions in the dissemination of the heritage they hold. The observation of these realities and the attempt to develop a platform for this project highlighted the possibility of the

enrichment that digital technologies allow in the relationship of scholars with the sources

The major effort made in this thesis and, in general, which is desirable for this kind of research, is to consider the different levels of access to archival data in order to attract a certain number of visitors with different attitudes towards the documents, trying to model an offer that takes into account the various types of audience that a digital resource of this kind can attract.

The conclusion of my three-year research is that a greater openess of the cultural institutions involved in the project – museums and archives as previously stated – which have always been considered dedicated to a specialised public, through the provision of information in digital form, will lead to a widespread possibility of access to a vast patrimony of materials by a mixed public, made up not only of scholars but also of enthusiasts and the curious.

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Anna Ghiraldini holds a Master's degree in Architecture at Università Iuav di Venezia (Italy), with a thesis investigating Canarian artist Cesar Manrique's compositional language using photography and video as means of communication. She has had the chance to work with national and international architects, artists

and professors during academic workshops and work experiences (Carme Pinós, Donatella Fioretti, Yona Friedman with Jean-Baptiste Decavèle). She just finished a PhD in Art History, focused on Design and Digital Humanities, the main objective of which was the study and digitisation of Enzo Mari's archive preserved at the CSAC archive of Università di Parma (Italy). She has been part of the editorial staff of "La Rivista di Engramma" peer-to-peer online journal (Venice, director Monica Centanni) since 2016.

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