Cultura e Materialidade

Prática etnográfica e observação

Para que serve um cadeira?

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viver culturalmente

«(...) o conceito de cultura encerra um **grau de abstracção bastante elevado**. Por outras palavras, a "cultura" **não** é algo que nós possamos alguma vez esperar encontrar "no terreno". O que nós encontramos são **pessoas cujas vidas as conduzem** numa viagem através do **espaço** e do **tempo** em **meios** que se lhes apresentam como **plenos de significado**. Pessoas que utilizam tanto as **palavras** como os **artefactos materiais** para conseguir **produzir** coisas e **comunicar** com os outros. Pessoas que, na sua conversação, desfiam um sem fim de metáforas de forma a **tecerem uma rede de equivalências simbólica**s em constante expansão. O que nós **não encontramos** são corpus de pensamento e costumes que estejam **claramente definidos** e que sejam **mutuamente exclusivos**, **partilhados de forma perfeita** por todos aqueles que se reconhecem neles (...). Seria então mais realista afirmar que a**s pessoas vivem culturalmente**, do que dizer que **vivem em culturas**.»

(Tim Ingold 1994, p.330).

Leve, robusta, empilhável, resistente às intempéries, barata, onipresente e anônima: a **cadeira de plástico monobloco** - é a cadeira de maior sucesso no mundo. É fabricada num único processo de produção com 3 quilos de polipropileno a 200 graus Celsius, na proporção de uma cadeira a cada 70 segundos. Um item produzido em massa desde a década de 1970. Mas o que isso tem a ver com design? E por que cada vez mais designers estão olhando mais de perto essa cadeira de plástico simples, de cujo inventor quase ninguém nunca ouviu falar, enquanto a sua popularidade no mundo ocidental está diminuindo?

Monobloc – A Chair for the World

Marti Guixé
Respect Cheap Furniture, **2009**
série 1| "Statement Chair

As it has spread around the world, the **Monobloc** chair has come to **represent the ambivalence of today's consumer society**. The plastic chair is the epitome of an **affordable – and thus democratic –** piece of furniture. At the same time, it **does not meet sustainability criteria and exemplifies the global mass consumption of uniform products**. Many contemporary designers have created new interpretations of the Monobloc that address these issues. Prominent examples are the Café Chair (2006) by Fernando and Humberto Campana, Respect Cheap Furniture (2009) by Martí Guixé, and Martino Gamper's Monothrone (2017), which was created especially for this exhibition.

Monobloc – A Chair for the World
17.03.– 09.07.2017 | Vitra Design Museum | Schaudepot

Enzo Mari
Proposal for un'autoprogettazione, 1973
33 1/2 × 19 7/10 in 85.1 × 50 cm
artek, (Alvar Aalto, filândia)

Sedia Universale 4867 Plastic Chair by **Joe Columbo** for Kartell in White

café chair from 'transplastic' collection, 2006
chair made out of wicker woven structure embracing a colored plastic chair
unlimited edition
H90 x L95 x W80 cm, 12 kg
image © fernando laszlo

fernando + humberto campana

Mono-Throne, 2017

Martino Gamper

White Plastic Chairs Are Taking Over the World

There are billions of monobloc chairs around the world, and they are completely "context free"—you can't tell when or where you are by looking at them. We asked a leading scholar if we should be worried by that.

By Jules Suzdaltsev

VICE, January 28, 2015

Across the street from my Brooklyn apartment sit a stack of white plastic chairs, slowly accumulating a layer of snow. On the other side of the country, three more of those same chairs are scattered around my parents' pool, while in Yemen, I imagine, rows upon rows of them are lined up for a wedding. Others float in a massive trash heap in the Pacific, there are probably more still in an old woman's home in South America, piled with magazines. I imagine there is at least one such white plastic chair circling us somewhere in orbit. Maybe that seems benign to you, but in truth, the ubiquity of those white chairs is terrifying, and a very bad sign for the state of world culture.

The first cheap, lightweight, stackable, injection molded plastic chair—called a monobloc chair—was probably designed in 1967 by an Italian named Vico Magistretti, then mass produced in the 70s by a company called the Grosfillex Group, but since there are no original patents, nobody really knows who was first responsible. Nor does anyone know how many manufacturers of monoblocs there are today, or even how many have been made, although that number is likely in the billions, though we do know they are all around the world.

But unlike similar global objects like lighters, televisions, paper clips, cigarettes, transistor radios, and AK-47s, these chairs are "context free." MIT's Director of Civic Media Studies, Ethan Zuckerman, explained the significance of the monobloc on his blog a few years ago: "Virtually every object suggests a time and place... The shape of electrical outlets, labels on any consumer products, fabrics, clothing all [are] clues as to whether a photo was taken in the 1970s or last week, in Sweden or Schenectady. The Monobloc is one of the few objects I can think of that is free of any specific context. Seeing a white plastic chair in a photograph offers you no clues about where or when you are."

Humans are separated by our various contexts: wealth, age, race, gender, geography, religion, sexual orientation, height, weight, etc. Manmade objects almost always follow those divides—certain people own certain things, certain possessions signify wealth or poverty or some subcultural cache. Yet the monobloc stands alone, as a singular object, unrelated to its surroundings, and yet distinctly unavoidable and non-biodegradable; perhaps immortal.

I spoke with Ethan Zuckerman about my monobloc anxiety, the ubiquity of these chairs, and what this says about the globalization of culture.

VICE: To me, the lack of context in the monobloc is inherently disturbing. Like, how can an object as widespread as this chair be so disconnected from its environment?

Ethan Zuckerman: I have the same problem with the monobloc. I was looking for some way to sort of talk about them as the world's most globalized object and thought there was some story behind it, like some giant conglomerate that produces all the world's monobloc chairs. The answer, of course, was more subtle and a bit more complicated than that. It's not that there's a single corporation, because it's actually a pretty easy process if you're going to have any level of industrialization. It is what you might call an "aspirational class object." So as long as you have people in a society with some disposable income, you're going to end up with monoblocs. You're going to end up with people looking for seating that is some level above sitting on the ground or sitting on a log or a very basic stool.

There's this essay by Ingo Niermann in which he says that "white plastic chairs are the real evil of globalization," in reference to that sort of cheap mass production spreading throughout an existing culture.

Ha! It's a super popular wealthy, Western, intellectual stance to be opposed to all aspects of globalization. It's so easy to just sit there and say that the spread of corporate power is bad, the indigenous culture is good, and the monobloc is an example of this cheap throwaway culture that's destroying the local culture. But I've spent a good chunk of my professional life in the developing world and a lot of people there are really excited about having access to the material culture that people in the West have. I just think it's insanely paternalistic to just sit there and say that poor people can't have monobloc chairs because it's bad for their culture. I think there are aspects of that which are probably true. It's probably quite bad for local furniture businesses when the monobloc takes hold. But I think this sort of notion that this is a virus and it should be fought fails to recognize that people in the developing world have a choice as to what they want to spend their resources on. I think it's condescending to the extreme. It's not that Walmart is churning these things out—it's actually people in the developing world making these. It doesn't feel like an obliteration of culture. It feels like poor people getting the chance to buy goods as representation of their aspirations.

So you consider that kind of globalization to be a necessary aspect of a developing country's evolution?

I guess what I'm saying is when you are connected with global information flow, and everybody is, your desire and material wants are going to globalize as well. When people see goods become available to them in local markets or seeing them on TV, people want those goods. So, I think you have to sort of recognize that people get to make decisions about goods. Pretending that it's not there and it's just going to all go away, that doesn't make a lot of sense to me. I think a lot of the critiques on globalization and imperialism in the material form are deeply naïve.

So it's not a concentrated effort to Westernize—just that the monobloc is objectively a pretty good seating solution because it is cheap and context- free. What happens to culture when the path of least resistance leads to the monobloc?

You could probably think about the state of a culture based on the state of its chairs. There's probably some state where the monobloc is a nicer type of furniture that people have on average, which people really aspire to, almost as a status symbol. There was a real period in the United States where homespun clothing was a real sign of poverty. What people wanted was manufactured fabrics—and obviously, at this point, we're now at a different place. Having a hand-tailored suit, for instance, is a status symbol because all the rest of us are wearing machine-made clothes. I guess you have a similar development with the monobloc where it is aspirational. It's a pretty good price-to-performance ratio, it's pretty well engineered, and at that point the handmade object becomes the luxury object.

But doesn't just lead to the global homogenization of culture?

I think the subtle thing is globalization isn't usually homogenous. McDonald's, for example. Everybody uses McDonald's as a shorthand for homogeneity, but it's not, it's deeply local. I think there are at least two monoblocs to be talked about, right? There's the one monobloc that is so generic that you don't know whether you're in Ghana or Georgia. There's also the monobloc that takes on the local identity, with an inlaid design or pattern. In some ways that's an even weirder monobloc because we don't know if it's really local or if it's made non-locally, like in China, but attempting to be locally appropriate instead of context-free.

Bootleg regional monoblocs.

Maybe the monobloc is sort of the victory of high modernist design. Designers are people who always want their objects to be universal. They never want them to be only culturally specific. They want to transcend, so it can be used by all people. So maybe this is the high modernist design culture just on a cultural level where everybody can afford it.

The monobloc approaches some level of natural man-made perfection. There's something beautiful about the ability to make something that is sturdy, lightweight, and cost-effective.
It is the outcome of one particular part of evolution. If you want to create a chair that is cheap, functional, easy to manufacture, and universally acceptable, at the end of a long process you would most likely have the monobloc. What's scary about it is that you sort of can't imagine turning the knob anything further because, at a certain point it's no longer a chair. It's evolution that can go no further.

And we don't even really know who invented it.

Well, the chair has this really interesting place for the designers. Every designer wants to make a chair, but chairs are a fucking pain in the ass. They are really, really difficult. The back has to curve, it has to be slanted at a certain angle, and making it comfortable for people to sit on is a pretty serious challenge—that's why designers' chairs are signature artworks. Then the monobloc is that challenge, plus the challenge of making something cheap enough to manufacture, and cheap enough for anyone to own. So we turn all those attributes to 11, and here's what we get. Maybe it's the world's most perfectly designed object.

Those White Plastic Chairs – The Monobloc and the Context-Free Object

Ethan Zuckerman
April 6, 2011

On a higher part of the beach, a single patio chair of molded white plastic commanded a wide view. Someone might have put it there to enjoy a beer in, or for winter sunbathing. Then again, it might have been flotsam. I have seen this identical type of plastic chair in photos of the Lagos, Nigeria, city dumps in the Times. A photo of a memorial gathering for a slain Al Qaeda leader in Jordan showed a row of these same chairs in a tent. I own six of these chairs myself. I believe this type of white molded-plastic chair belongs to the growing category of the world's ubiquitous objects.
His observation stuck with me, and I found myself searching through photos I've taken around the world in my travels, searching for the plastic chair. It is, indeed, ubiquitous.

His observation stuck with me, and I found myself searching through photos I've taken around the world in my travels, searching for the plastic chair. It is, indeed, ubiquitous.

Here's my friend, Sarpei Nunoo, leaning on a particularly attractive version in a beer garden near central Accra. Some large percentage of my Ghanaian photos feature the white chair in the background, like this photo of my friend and former teacher, Bernard Woma, performing with his dancers in Nima, Accra. And they're certainly not limited to that city. Here's a stack of chairs, surrounded by cranes, in Arusha, Tanzania. Expand the color palette beyond white and I find examples in a dusty village in Rajastan, a quiet street in Palermo, Sicily, a roadside bar outside Jakarta.

In Abuja, Nigeria, they're not just furniture – they're key stage props for a dancer who balances plates, trays, tables and chairs on his body while executing full splits.

I started to think that perhaps I'd start collecting images of white plastic chairs, when I discovered that I'd been beaten to the punch… many, many times over.

There's a Flickr group titled, "Those White Plastic Chairs" which features 930 images of white plastic chairs, taken in at least a dozen countries. (There's a more inclusive, but slightly less impressive collection of multicolored plastic chairs on Flickr as well.)

One of the contributors to the Flickr group is Jens Thiel, from whom I learned the correct nomenclature for the chair in question. It's a plastic Monobloc chair, named because it's a single piece of polypropylene (mono-block), heated to to 220 degrees centigrade and extruded into a mold that can produce chairs every 70 seconds. Monoblocs are produced throughout the world, in China, Taiwan, the US, Israel, Mexico and elsewhere. At roughly $3 a piece, it's easy to understand how they've become so pervasive.

Thiel maintains a website and a Facebook page dedicated to the Monobloc. The site features everything from an examination of creative ways the Monobloc is repaired in countries where it's too expensive to replace, to numerous art pieces that feature the Monobloc. My favorite artistic interpretations include a beautifully morbid chair by pool called "souviens toi que tu vas mourir" and a fantastically subversive piece called "white billion chairs 33" by Tina Roeder. Roeder's piece features a pile of chairs each perforated with up to 10,000 holes, rendering them beautiful but totally non-functional.

Artists and designers appear to have a love/hate relationship with the Monobloc. Some artists attempt to dress up the chair, melding it with other chairs, rendering it in wood, reupholstering it in leather. Others demand that we end discrimination against cheap furniture, like Martí Guixé's Statement Chair. An art book by Arnd Friedrichs and Kerstin Finger titled "220C Virus Monobloc" sums up the tensions – it's an object worthy of a book-length study as well as a virus, reproducing itself around the world and crowing out other designs for chairs.

I don't have strong feelings about whether the Monobloc is an object of beauty or a target for derision… though I'd suggest that any design as successful as the Monobloc has proved its evolutionary worth. What I'm intrigued by is the idea that the Monobloc is a context-free object.

To explain what I mean:

Fifteen years ago, one of my jobs at Tripod was managing our abuse and legal teams. With several million webpages hosted on our service, some of them violated our terms of service and hosted pornography. That wasn't a bit problem – we deleted pages that violated our TOS. But when we encountered pages that might be hosting child pornography, we had a more complicated procedure. We copied files to floppy disk (remember, it was 1996!) and mailed them to our regional FBI office, along with information on the IP address the user in question had signed up from.

One of the best guys on my team went to Boston for a week to train to become a "confidential informant", so he could testify if we'd found evidence in a child pornography case that went to court. Curious guy that he was, he asked whether the information we were providing – the IP address signed up from – was helpful in building cases. Sure, he was told, but not as useful as the information in the photos. Almost every detail in a photo held information about the time and location the photo was taken. The shape of electrical outlets, labels on any consumer products, fabrics, clothing all were clues as to whether a photo was taken in the 1970s or last week, in Sweden or Schenectady.

Virtually every object suggests a time and place. The Monobloc is one of the few objects I can think of that is free of any specific context. Seeing a white plastic chair in a photograph offers you no clues about where or when you are. I have a hard time thinking of other objects that are equally independent of context. Asking friends to propose a similar object, most people suggest a Coke can… but I can tell you that Coke is presented very differently in different countries, in glass bottles as well as cans, with labels in local languages. The Monobloc offers no linguistic cues, no obvious signs that it's been localized. Wherever you are, it's at home.

For me, the Monobloc isn't so much a glimpse of the future, where we suspect that mega-corporation will blur distinctions between Albania and Afghanistan. Even McDonalds, the avatar for global homogenization, makes heavy investments in localization. if it didn't, it would be very hard to sell beef burgers in majority-Hindu India. It's going to be a while before McChicken Tikka (an excellent sandwich, by the way) is so pervasive that its wrapper doesn't reveal that you're at an Indian McDonalds, not a Japanese one.

The Monobloc is a reminder that the world is still filled with the local, the unique, the distinctive. Globalization may be homogenizing the world, but most objects still offer some context. The few objects that defy localization deserve some special form of lionization. They've achieved a level of design perfection where they don't require adaptation to be as successful in Africa as they are in suburban America. Dismiss them at your peril – context-free objects like the Monobloc have achieved a sort of global celebrity that few humans could ever hope for.

exercício ii

observação | cultura e materialidade | prática etnográfica | modos de sentar

Tendo em conta os objectivos da UC:

a | Desenvolver a capacidade para reconhecer e integrar conhecimentos sobre as relações entre cultura, materialidade e criatividade a partir da análise teórica e da observação de exemplos etnográficos.

b | Demonstrar capacidade de recolher, seleccionar e interpretar informação relevante através de métodos inspirados pela observação de forma a gerar ideias originais com vista a uma fundamentação sólida da sua prática enquanto designer.

O exercício tem os seguintes objectivos:

Este é um exercício de observação e reflexão a partir de situações reais seleccionadas pela/os estudantes. Após uma análise crítica e identificação de certos aspectos que nos ajudem a entender a noção de **cultura material** a partir de **exemplos concretos da vida corrente**, as/os estudantes **partem para um exercício de observação e registos de modos e práticas do sentar.** A observação pode ser feita em locais diversificados, incluindo o campus da ESAD.CR, mas não só.

Síntese das indicações para o exercício:

- Escolher locais de observação diversificada ou ativar uma postura permanece de observação e registo pelos locais que frequentam durante a interrupção lectiva de forma a identificar diferentes modos de sentar.
- Após a retoma da atividade letiva, percorrer o campus e repetir o exercício.
- Criar um breve manual / listagem de "tipologias" do sentar. Quanto mais tipologias, mais completo fica o exercício.
- Trazer impressas, organizadas por tipologias e passíveis de serem recortadas para integrarem um mapa geral da turma, a ser organizado pela colecção de tipologias encontradas por cada um.
- Completar o exercício escolhendo uma das cadeiras 8 cadeiras da exposição Cross Cultural Chairs e explicando como foi realizada em discussão em aula.

Procedimentos de entrega do exercício:

- **Aula de 1** recolha no campus da ESAD.CR.
- **Até aula 2** fazer recolha no dia-à-dia de cada, assim como recolha no interior do campus.
- **Aula 3:** trazer imagens registadas impressas e organizadas por tipologias.
- **Aula 4:** criação de mapa colectivo com todas as tipologias.
- **Final da aula 4:** selecionar uma das cadeiras 8 cadeiras da exposição Cross Cultural Chairs para complementar o exercício.

Atenção:

! Pedir autorização para fotografar e explicar exercício

! Podem conversar e indagar sobre as representações que as pessoas fazem do sentar no campus e em geral.

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