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SHIFTING VECTORS IN THE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE:

ARTISTS IN INDUSTRIAL LABORATORIES

Barbara Tiberi

Historically, a broadened concept of creative experimentation took place in the 1960s and has influenced artistic collaboration up until the present time. New material and social possibilities have been added to traditional techniques and spaces of artistic activity. Among other aspects, expanding the field of creativity has led to a rising mutual interest in the world of art and industry. Factory workshops have become laboratories where artists can invent on multiple levels: the experimentation involves both technical aspects and personal relationships. This article addresses the laboratorial nature of artistic activity in an industrial setting, examining the different directions knowledge can be transferred between artists and employees.



Angela Palmer, *F1 Red Hot Orange exhaust*, 2014, Renault Art Collection, Paris. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: © Angela Palmer.

The first section proposes a brief insight into artists' experimental activity in industry, looking at the case of French automobile manufacturer Renault, which has an artistic program spanning from the late 1960s to today. At the company, artists have sought support from specialized technicians to create their own works. The second section addresses the evolution of this phenomenon towards more socially and relationally oriented examples. It does so by analysing the case of Italian kitchen range hood factory Elica, founded in the 1970s by art amateur Ermanno Casoli, and which started its artistic experimentation in 2007 by establishing a foundation. Here, artists are invited by the company to contribute to its development: they are seen as providers of innovative ideas that can be beneficial for the corporate environment. However, artists can also decide to subvert these binary vectors and create experimental and unprecedented circular dynamics in the transmission of knowledge.



Arman working on his *Accumulations* at Renault workshops, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1967. (Source: Pierre Restany, "Arman, son atelier Renault," *Connaissance des arts*, no. 206, 1969).

Technical Knowledge: From Company to Artist

From 1967 to the present day, the car manufacturer Renault has promoted projects that let artists use the company's facilities as a laboratory, offering new technological opportunities.¹ Despite being a significant and organized industry, Renault has never given a formal structure and a coherent theoretical framework to its artistic program. The output has always been de facto a rather material-based laboratory. Among the first participating artists were Arman, César, Jean Dubuffet, Jesús Rafael Soto, Takis, Jean Tinguely and Victor Vasarely.² Later, many other artists experimented with different approaches and established collaborations with Renault's specialized technicians. This added otherwise unavailable knowledge, methodology and complex machinery to the spectrum of artistic possibilities.

The artistic program continues today although under different circumstances compared to the early years. An interesting collaboration took place recently with Scottish artist Angela Palmer, who was given access to the highly secretive Renault Formula 1 laboratories in Viry-Châtillon (Paris). The artist deconstructed the world's most successful F1 engine, the RS27, which Sebastian Vettel used in four consecutive world championships. Palmer worked with the engineers on their CAD drawings and created a body of sculptures by upscaling engine parts. The pieces were then shown in the exhibition *Adrenalin* (2014).³ Ann Hindry, curator of Renault's art collection, affirmed that the work the artist created is "so much related to what Renault has always searched for in its long relationship with art: a sharing of knowledge and creativity."⁴ Palmer's exchange with the company's engineers is an example of the communication through which artists seek to enrich and integrate their knowledge with that of specialized technicians.

Palmer is not new to collaborating with industry. In her work, encountering the scientific knowledge of professionals at companies, universities and institutions (including NASA) is part of her artistic approach. The implications of this relationship are manifold: on one hand, the exchange enriches the artist's possibilities, and on the other, as discussed further, it raises questions regarding the company's utilisation of the artist's presence.

Relational Knowledge: From Artist to Company

In 2007, the kitchen range hood manufacturer Elica established the Fondazione Ermanno Casoli (FEC). The FEC fosters projects that connect art to business organizations, with the intention of promoting interaction among employees, to strengthen teamwork within the company. Contemporary art is used as an educational and methodological tool for workers who participate in seminars and practical workshops that artists lead. Many professional figures are involved in the process. These include: FEC's artistic director, Marcello Smarrelli, who is responsible for conceptual planning; the artist, chosen on the basis of their interests, taking into consideration how these will be beneficial to the project; professionals from consulting companies, serving as both preliminary mediators (known as "facilitators"), especially regarding communications between the employees and the artist, and reviewers of the (successful) outcome of the activity; the company, which is usually the deciding stakeholder in the process; the employees, the actual protagonists of the programs and, lastly, the local social context in which the company is operating—this is always a consideration when designing the projects—because community members often take part in the activities.



Arman, *Accumulation Renault no. 103 (Le Murex)*, 1967. (Source: Pierre Restany, "Arman, son atelier Renault," *Connaissance des arts*, no. 206, 1969).



Arman working on his *Accumulations* at Renault workshops, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1967. (Source: Pierre Restany, "Arman, son atelier Renault," *Connaissance des arts*, no. 206, 1969).

Elica acts as an incubator for the creative program in which the process and results can be experimented with and tested for the first time. Often projects are then transferred to other companies, institutions and even universities for interdisciplinary teams of experts to further analyse.⁵ Given that this method can be reproduced, the FEC has become a reference model in the field of managerial education through contemporary art. In addition to Elica, many companies have decided to become involved in specific artistic programs, which are often designed ad-hoc for each one.

Some observations can be made with regard to the stakeholders' list and the internal role balance the company seems to subvert, but actually preserves. Firstly, the industry maintains the leading position for itself, relegating all the other actors (primarily the workers) to subsidiary roles. Secondly, the constant presence of "facilitators" further reduces the space for the employees, as if they were unable to offer a relevant contribution without external solicitation. The mediator conveys the workers' experiences following a proven pathway, which enables the company to obtain the expected results.

The artists involved in these projects are many and varied in terms of the interests, techniques and strategies they adopt when collaborating with the employees. These artists include: Francesco Arena, Francesco Barocco, Ettore Favini, Andrea Mastrovito, Margherita Moscardini, Cesare Pietroiusti, Pietro Ruffo and Patrick Tuttofuoco. We now focus on artist Marinella Senatore, who led projects for the FEC, which are emblematic examples of a different dynamics in the transmission of knowledge. In Palmer's experience with Renault, the artist looked for professional skills and found them in specialized technicians working in industry. Concerning Marinella Senatore's work, the company initially invited the artist to share her knowledge with the employees with the aim of activating innovative mechanisms in the corporate environment. The experience was then turned into a mutual exchange between the artist and the employees.

Filming the process #1 (2011)⁶ is the title Marinella Senatore gave to the workshop she conducted with twenty employees of Biotronik Italia S.P.A. This is one of the many activities the FEC has proposed to other companies. The workshop focused on fostering collaborative dynamics through film making.⁷ Similar

to an orchestra performance and other collective artistic activities, the creative process becomes a shared moment. The workshop taught the participants how to balance individual work and shared goals, improve cooperation through collective thinking and ensure successful teamwork through the contribution of all the participants.

The artist considers that film making is a way to work together and discover the effort behind creative production. Instead of providing a fixed theme, Senatore let the employees decide on every aspect of the project, including scriptwriting. This became an occasion for the group to reflect on their work environment, ethics, related problems and future perspectives. Overcoming difficulties together when lacking skills was, according to Senatore, a powerful bonding for the employees.⁸ Her intention was to create a collective memory for them to share, something that brought them together, working as a team in which the usual hierarchies were temporarily suspended. The corporate environment, in its manifold variations, was used as a social laboratory where it became possible to challenge established approaches to the issues of society.

The project is aligned with Senatore's aesthetics: she focuses on collective dynamics and how individuals in a group engage with each other. The choice of involving common people acquires

a special significance for her, because her performances are not staged and every participant or group of people just represent themselves. The projects would not have the same reason to exist without the specific territory and time, which determine the network of relations and reactions that take place. The artist considers herself an activator of movements, intended as both physical and political phenomena. After the activation, the mechanism functions on its own, and Senatore becomes a conscious witness of the autonomously developing dynamics. In this way, she turns artistic practice into a social laboratory.⁹ Her works become symbols of, or experimental alternatives to, power relations in today's world.

Subverting Critical Perspectives: Towards a Circular Exchange

The debate on the activity of artists in industry and the risk of industry using the artist's creativity for commercial needs is animated.¹⁰ Artwashing from companies seeking to appeal to public opinion is well-documented and widespread in current neoliberal capitalist society. This phenomenon is the direct outcome of the pioneering experiences started in the 1960s, but has now adapted to an increasingly money-making and profit-driven economy.

Marinella Senatore, *Filming the Process*, 2011.
Video still. Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione
Ermanno Casoli.



Not all artists have the same reaction to, or against, increasing capitalist industrialization, as this depends on many factors, including their social status and political beliefs. Some artists are sceptical and see industry as their worst enemy, while others—such as the ones mentioned in this article—despite their doubts, try to overcome the division and seek a mutual exchange of skills and knowledge. The matter is not whether one approach is more just than another, but how an artist chooses to act, keeping true to their ethics.

Senatore's example shows that cooperating with a company does not entail per se the automatic result of becoming merely an instrument. For instance, the artist used the mentioned workshop to further elaborate her own vision, learning from the participants, while not just teaching them something. Although, she provided them with basic knowledge on film making, she also found inspiration in their working system, viewing it as a metaphor for her own world of contemporary art and cinema. She is particularly interested in what participating in the activity brings to all the people involved. Her answer thus resides in basing the work method on democratic exchange. Artistic activities, therefore, activate a circular exchange of knowledge, involving the artist, the participants, the company—in the considered example—and a whole community taking part in her projects at many levels.

The possibility for the artist to intelligently subvert the established dynamics “using” the given situation to share ideas and pursue their beliefs instead of “being used” by the company depends on their own choices. This complicates the role of the artist in today's society, who is called on to take a position in the Manichean confrontation between “pure art” and an “evil industry.” At the same time, however, the artist is given the possibility to overcome this dualism and break through the boundaries of capitalism, subverting them from within.

Marinella Senatore, *The School of Narrative Dance (Ecuador)*, 2014, Participatory project. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

Marinella Senatore, *The School of Narrative Dance: Little Chaos #2 (Cagliari)*, 2013. Participatory project. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

1. Information regarding Renault's artistic endeavours was gathered from interviews with Ann Hindry (Boulogne-Billancourt, March 5, 2020)..
2. Ann Hindry, *Renault et l'art : une épopée moderne* (Paris: Hazan, 1999).
3. Angela Palmer, *Adrenalin*, exhibition catalogue (London: The Fine Art Society Contemporary, 2014).
4. Ibid.
5. Deborah Carè, Chiara Paolino, Marcello Smarrelli, *Innovare l'impresa con l'arte. Il metodo della Fondazione Ermanno Casoli*, Milano, Egea, 2018. I extend my gratitude to Marcello Smarrelli and Cristina Terzoni for sharing relevant material for this work.
6. A second edition (2012) involved the students of the Sole 24 Ore Business School. Senatore also conceived a third activity for the foundation, *Working is Networking* (2013).
7. Marinella Senatore is also a professional filmmaker, educated at the National School of Cinema in Rome.
8. The artist presenting the project at FEC in a video interview. [Online]: bit.ly/3fzlihy
9. Her projects involve all kinds of people: political activists, scholars, illiterate people, students, housewives, musicians, writers, trade unionists, retirees, teachers, feminists and Alpino soldiers.
10. Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Sami Siegelbaum, “Business Casual: Flexibility in Contemporary Performance Art,” *Art Journal*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2013, 48-63. Max Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power. Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2014). Oliver Mould, *Against Creativity* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2018).

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