

Oltre l'interazione naturale Beyond Natural Interaction

Luca Simeone

Ho avuto l'occasione di incontrare Ranjit Makkuni nel suo laboratorio, la Sacred World Foundation, a New Delhi. Si tratta di un piccolo edificio, ricco di straordinarie opere d'arte tradizionali provenienti dall'India e dal Sud-Est asiatico e dei più innovativi dispositivi per il physical computing e l'interaction design. Dopo essere stato un ricercatore di spicco presso il prestigioso Centro di ricerca di Palo Alto della Xerox per 17 anni, dove ha sviluppato i linguaggi di programmazione orientati agli oggetti e le prime interfacce grafiche utente, Ranjit ha deciso di tornare in India, per cercare di occuparsi di temi relativi alla comunicazione interculturale e alla sostenibilità. Per usare le sue parole: "Nelle comunità rurali, gli abitanti potranno ignorare completamente le nozioni di GUI elaborate nella Silicon Valley, come ad esempio premere un pulsante, selezionare con il mouse e cliccare, ma hanno una conoscenza sofisticata delle tecniche manuali e delle interfacce tattili. Quale può essere dunque l'equivalente di un'interfaccia GUI nei contesti dei villaggi? Quali narrative possono essere rintracciate nelle arti performative tradizionali come il teatro, le marionette e la danza mascherata? In che modo queste forme narrative riflettono la percezione del tempo e dello spazio di una società tradizionale? In che modo esse influenzano il design di un'interfaccia GUI non basata su Windows?"

Da allora, la Sacred World Foundation esplora un terreno innovativo costruendo dei ponti tra le culture tecnologiche e le culture tradizionali, e sfida le comuni strutture di interazione naturale, creando straordinarie esperienze interattive, presentate in tutto il mondo.

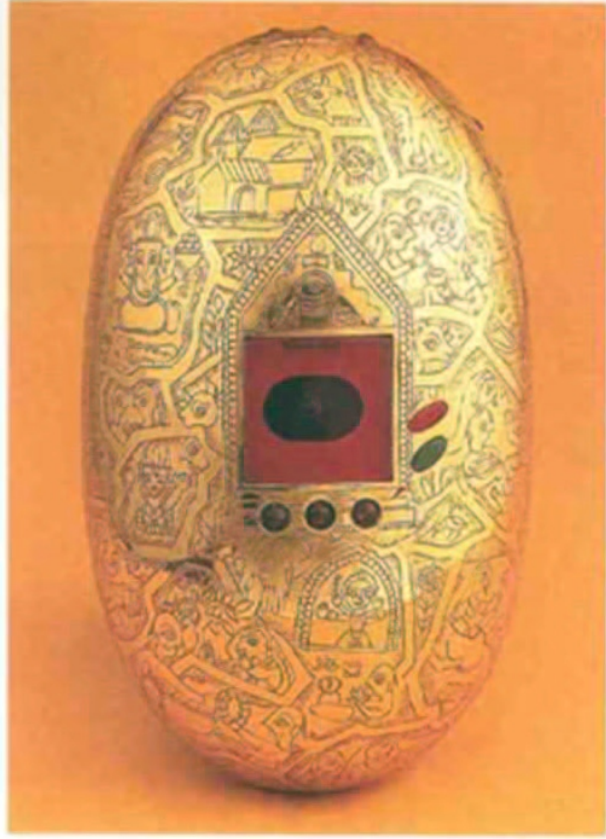
Quando ho chiesto a Ranjit se sentisse la mancanza del PARC Xerox e dei suoi laboratori di ricerca negli Stati Uniti, mi ha detto una cosa che mi è rimasta impressa nella mente: "Ho deciso di lasciare gli Stati Uniti e di trasferirmi in India perché ero stanco di vivere dentro il mio CV". Ora, nella sua vita quotidiana, accanto al lavoro di designer e ricercatore, trova sempre un momento per praticare yoga e suonare il sitar.

Ranjit Makkuni, Crossing Project: Living, Dying and Transformation in Banaras, allestimento interattivo | interactive exhibition, Sacred World Research Laboratory, New Delhi, 2001, Photos: Sacred World Research Laboratory



Luca Simeone: La maggior parte dei suoi progetti consiste nell'esplorare i ponti esistenti tra le tipiche strutture tecnologiche e le culture tradizionali. Potrebbe dirci qualcosa di più sul suo approccio?

Ranjit Makkuni: In un'epoca in cui tutto cambia in un fulmine, lavoriamo con le culture spirituali del mondo per creare nuove forme di documentazione mediatica che consentano di cogliere la saggezza perenne rendendola accessibile a tutti. Per quanto concerne il design dei prodotti, i lavori si concentrano sul ripristino dell'ornamento in un mondo caratterizzato dalla produzione di massa e dall'omogeneizzazione. I tassisti di Mumbai ornano i loro taxi (tecnologia) in modo che il conducente immigrato (costretto a lavorare lontano da casa) possa





While people in the West have no problem with interacting with 'black and beige' product designs, they face trouble interacting with objects in a museum.

In Asia, in direct contrast to the untouchable object, the focus is on personalizing and befriending the object and image. People make the image as part of their own.

L. S.: For some of your projects you worked with Italian design companies. If I correctly remember in the Eternal Gandhi Museum you used some lamps from Flos and some creations from Murano's glass factories. How do you see the Italian design industry today?

R. M.: I have always been amazed at the creativity shown by Italian designers to translate an artistic idea into a market, or, in many instances, the ability of Italian companies to create a new market.

While they have carved new ground in furniture design it will be great if they addressed the inclusion of world motifs, patterns and crafts in the products.

Another reason I am in awe of Italian design is that while my work has principally ended up in museums, I respect and value the ability to translate the values so that the artifact ends up in people's homes at a large scale. Italian industry has succeeded in that.

L. S.: Is there any designer you appreciate both from the past and still working?

R. M.: Many. And at different levels: both abstract expression to the personalization of forms to craft.

I admire Louis Kahn's ability for recreating powerful spaces based on available construction techniques in India and Bangladesh as he designed the buildings in Dacca and Ahmadabad.

I admire Cartier for restoring the ornament as they pioneered the personalization of forms of the then mobile devices: the bejeweled clock and the watch.

L. S.: This magazine is also addressed to design students. What advice would you give to a young designer?

R. M.: With respect to how to craft a curriculum in design, as Vitruvius' famous dictum of design as "commodity, firmness and delight", it will be important to integrate the form and function, the arts and sciences, the ability to reason but also to let go.



Luca Simeone: Most of your projects explore bridges between typical technological frameworks and traditional cultures. Can you tell us something more about your vision?

Ranjit Makkuni: In the era of lightning change, we work with the world's spiritual cultures to create new forms of media documentation so that perennial wisdom can be captured and made accessible to all. In terms of product design the works focus on restoring ornament in a world characterized by mass production and homogenization. Taxi drivers in Mumbai ornament their taxis (a technology) so that the migrant driver (who is far way from home) can remember his village and values while on the move. Hence part of the solution today may be the recapture of ornament and the creation of personalized meaning in an environment of depersonalization.

Ranjit Makkuni, Eternal Gandhi Multimedia Museum, allestimento interattivo | interactive exhibition, Sacred World Research Laboratory, New Delhi, 2005, Photos: Sacred World Research Laboratory, Lekha Washington



L. S.: Can you comment on your idea of natural interaction?

R. M.: In rural, agricultural based communities, the origins of most physical art and craft forms show us the integral relationship between gesture, body, instrument and posture; for example, a farmer measuring distances through the proportion and dimension of the hands to plant seeds in a paddy field, the calligrapher's hand strokes, the sitar player's hand gestures or the weaver and spinner who subconsciously through the sense of palpability measures thread count.

The world's traditional arts and crafts show us that intelligence does not just reside in the 'head' but also in the 'body'. They also show endless innovation and freshness: the world of crafts shows countless improvisation based on fixed themes. Hence these tactile interfaces suggest and reveal a higher intuition of the hand-mind connection.

L. S.: "The Crossing Project", your award-winning project that combines traditional Indian creativity and interaction design, has been extensively exhibited throughout the world. Did you notice any difference in the ways the project has been received in so many different museums, exhibitions, places and cultures?

R. M.: In India the project had been easily received and seemed to naturally fit into the cultural and mythological context. However in the West there was the need to scaffold user into mythology. More than the content of the exhibition, more interesting was the notion that in the West the museum functions as 'sacred' place in which people are reluctant to touch things. This is in sharp contrast to Asia where almost every 'valuable' object invites personalization, whether pouring water over the Linga, Shiva's phallic form on the banks of Varanasi, or pouring water over the Buddhas in Yangon, or adding gold leaves on Buddhas in Bangkok.

I had the chance to meet Ranjit Makkuni in his laboratory – the Sacred World Foundation – in Delhi. It is a small building, filled up with astonishing traditional artworks from India and South-East Asia, and with the most innovative physical computing and interaction design devices. After being a leading researcher at the prestigious Xerox Palo Alto Research Center for 17 years, where he pioneered explorations in object-oriented computer languages and the first graphic user interfaces, Ranjit decided to move back to India, trying to address themes related to cross-cultural communication and sustainability. In his words: “In rural communities, villagers may be illiterate with respect to Silicon Valley’s notions of GUI, i.e., button pushing, point and click, but highly sophisticated with respect to hand skills and tactile interfaces. What is the equivalent of GUI in village contexts? What narratives are found in the village in the traditional performing arts of puppetry, theater, and mask dance? How do these narrative forms reflect a traditional society’s perception of time and space? How might these inform the design of non-Windows based GUI?”

Since then, the Sacred World Foundation has explored innovation created by building bridges between techno and traditional cultures, and has challenged the common frameworks of natural interaction, creating amazing interactive experiences, exhibited throughout the world. When I asked Ranjit if he missed the Xerox PARC and his research labs in US, he told me something that stuck with me since then “I decided to leave US and move to India because I was tired of living inside my CV”. Now, in his daily life, alongside his work as designer and researcher, he finds the right time to practise yoga and play the sitar.

