Episode 5: Volume with Sara Ricciardi

Transcript of the fifth episode of the podcast "Con Ferré, progetti e principi in dialogo" titled "Volume", with guest Sara Ricciardi. MOOC "Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré", Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre with Paolo Ferrarini. In this series of conversations, we meet designers and practitioners from every field. With them, we talk about their projects, their challenges and their working methods, always starting from Gianfranco Ferré's design principles – namely body, matter, colour, detail, volume and movement. We will discover viewpoints, disciplines and applications that help us to understand more clearly Gianfranco Ferré's vision, his cultural legacy and the relevance of his thinking in all the different fields of contemporary design.

Ferré's architectural training is evident throughout his work. Volume animates each of his creations, from garments born out of a two-dimensional geometric drawing to masterpieces masterfully draped directly on the mannequin. Like a space to be inhabited, for Ferré the garment becomes the three-dimensional expression of form. In this episode, recorded at the Milan headquarters of the Research Center, we meet Sara Ricciardi, designer and lecturer in social design. Our dialogue revolves precisely around the concept of volume, which we explore by reflecting on materials, colours and ideas that generate projects that are effective – and even magical.

Paolo Ferrarini: Sara, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center, Digital Innovation for the Cultural and Creative Industries at the Politecnico di Milano. Today with you we'll be talking about one of the key values in Gianfranco Ferré's creative process, namely volume. The first time I came across one of your works was at Fuorisalone 2018. It was Arcadia, curated by Alice Stori Lichtenstein – an immersive, sensory installation that created a volume inside a volume. Can you tell us about it?

Sara Ricciardi: Of course. Hello everyone, hello Paolo, thank you. I'm delighted to be here with a word that has a gigantic yet elusive consistency. When we met I was at a specific moment in my journey: I was moving on from research on products to my first extension into space. I had to bring the theme of heritage, which Alice Stori Lichtenstein had entrusted to me for Design Week, into this room of about twenty-five square metres – a small place in which I had to recreate a castle. Walking through the castle I realised that heritage is something we do not choose. It's something we inherit – genetic, material. It arrives to us; that's what we have, and it always has a certain weight: strong, heavy. Walking around her castle, looking at those wallpapers, I immediately felt the weight of having those places, of having all those ancestors looking at you with their slightly inquisitorial, slightly judgemental gaze.
So at Design Week I decided to bring a vision of Alice's research, because she herself has a fresh approach. I filled that room with draped velvet and, in the middle, a volume: a ball, four metres in diameter, covered with scenic set-ups of eighteenth-century chinoiserie wallpapers. It clearly inspired a kind of awe, a kind of fear. You walked in and found this pink belly blocking your way.

And yet, as people came in – at first one by one, because they were all a bit scared – at a certain point they began to touch it. There were also air jets that switched on, and the volume started to float, because I had filled it half with compressed air and half with helium, so that this ball could play with you. Because in reality, when we play with what we have, everything becomes lighter. Whatever volume we have around us, if we approach it in a playful way, it changes. Wonder, joy and fun appear as we start to relate to our own heritage, to the volumes we have received – and in a flick of the tail we start to play with them.

PF: How do you think volume affects the perception of objects and spaces? What you've just told us is one example, but can you describe, in your experience and in what you have observed, how the role of volume interweaves with the perception of space?

SR: I'll start from an early, important moment when volume entered my vision in a powerful way. As a child I went to Catholic school run by nuns and, at a certain point, I would walk through the classrooms, then along this narrow corridor, and from one door you entered a grand nave. Years later I discovered it was much smaller than I had perceived it at the age of seven. In that nave I understood how the volume of that architecture gave me a sense of the sacred and of reverence. It was very particular, because there was so much emptiness there to receive me, and yet there was the fullness of my prayer. Every whisper in a church is a divine extension; it creates a counter-volume of sound, of song. For me that was an extraordinary epiphany on the theme of volume, because I understood the relationship between my body and the feeling of places, of spaces, which in their configuration give me a specific sensation at a physical, cellular, epidermal level. You feel it in your skin. Just as when we stand before mountains, boulders, the volume of water – it is horror and fascination at the same time. Volume is extraordinary in creating this kind of relationship.

PF: That is the volume of space. If instead we move down to a smaller scale and start thinking about the volume of objects, do you use these plays of volume and scale, or do you use volume to convey messages that matter to you at a given moment, or that are linked to what a client is asking for or to the project you want to realise?

SR: As project material, volume has been very interesting for me. For the first two years of my studies, maybe three, I just couldn't do it. I'm a very cerebral, very narrative person – I write, I develop things in words – and I could not externalise, could not conceive the three-dimensionality of matter and of volume. I had to land in a distant, exotic world. I myself was a compressed volume, like a chaos that contains everything and gives nothing. You need a kind of internal explosion that allows you, from that compression, to start creating. For me that arrived in the form of ikebana. Japanese ikebana – the composition of the three tensions of heaven, human and earth – is a discipline. It's a philosophy, yes, but it's a daily discipline. I realised I was completely compressed: I couldn't put forms in front of me, I couldn't balance them, I was too full. So my first point of arrival was actually the world of emptiness. Emptiness allows you to work with volume. For me that was a magical epiphany: I couldn't create because I couldn't see emptiness; I didn't understand that emptiness itself was a volume in which you could dance with trust, with eros, with seduction. That's when I started to create, because you are always interacting with another volume. When you set yourself these boundaries of dimension, of volume, then you feel safer, more at ease in creating, because you can see tangible elements around you. That was truly fundamental and foundational

for me, and it opened up my career, which indeed began with "Natura Morta" and my supports for plants in their final pose.
My advice is: I started ikebana at the Japanese Cultural Center with teacher Keiko and her book on ikebana, together with a text such as Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows", which is all about conceiving darkness.
The lacquerwork, for example, is interesting because it glows in candlelight; it emerges. Those Japanese pieces of furniture, which at that time in my life I found ugly, came alive and winked at you in the light of the flame, because the lacquer reflected that light. Extraordinary. I began to understand darkness, emptiness, light and shadow – because there is no supremacy among the elements; it is always about how you position yourself within them. That was foundational and fundamental for opening up my career, which, as I said, began with Still Life and those supports for plants in their last pose.

PF: So colour also has a role in defining volume. In Japanese and Eastern art, as you've just said, black has a fundamental role in creating space and volume. Caravaggio also used black backgrounds to create depth and openings. In your design world, are there relationships between colour and volume?

SR: Colour is of course another extraordinary tool, and it is always related to volume. It doesn't exist on its own. I still remember a physics lesson where we were told that colours do not exist except in relation to the light we have. I was shocked – what do you mean, colours don't exist? These thermal shocks are very important for understanding how to relate to things, because design is always a work of relation with the circumstances around you. In reality colour and volume are fundamental together.
I'll mention another beautiful book, "Parallel Minds", which talks about interfaces and about how crucial it is that materials – speaking now very specifically about materials – react to one another: water, which in air transforms into a drop with that marvellous dome on top; wood, which changes in a certain light. Volume is clearly involved in all this. The volumetry of Arcadia, which you mentioned earlier, my first step into space from the small object, was perceived in that way because the room around it was only slightly larger than the ball's circumference. Everything works through a coordinated set of criteria. And why did I choose that pink? I could have chosen many other colours that were present in the castle. I knew there would be a perceptual twist, because as you walk through an architecture in tufa, travertine, stone, then you arrive at that abrupt shift to powder pink – it creates a short circuit in perception. Colour works a bit like animals use it: to seduce, to warn, to camouflage. Colour applied to that tiny element or to that huge element clearly allows you to create very interesting relationships.
Right now I'm thinking of the chimney you see as you drive out towards Cornaredo, painted with a sky gradient. It's a really interesting volume: this brutal form rises in a totemic way, and yet with this sky gradient everything becomes refined, everything becomes delicate. It's extraordinary – it's a poem. Colour applied to volume can create poetry.

PF: Is there a material that you automatically associate with the value of volume?

SR: A material that always has a kind of magic in how it expresses volume is blown glass – in the way it opens out under the force of your own breath. There's something alchemical there, because I love processes of relationship. I teach social design, so I like this osmosis, this being together; I like volumetry that reacts to you. Whenever I'm in Murano, in the many glassworks

where I've produced pieces, I'm always struck by how that mass of fire opens up under your breath and creates these magical volumes of teardrop, of crystal. For me that's the first material that evokes the word "volume".

PF: What comes to my mind are all the foams, sponges, polyurethanes, but also those ultra-new materials that claim to be the lightest solid in the world – in short, materials that incorporate air in some way, that only make sense in relation to air. The opposite of marble. All that which is the opposite of marble. So, the interaction is what you were saying at the beginning about space, that emptiness creates space. The word volume also has a double meaning, which you've already hinted at. We talk about space, but we also talk about sound. How do you see that relationship? How do you interact with that dimension?

SR: I love reading cosmogonies, which tell us that we are born from a roar. Primitive music is a fascinating theme: it speaks precisely of this emerging from sleep, from this sonic volume. In fact the first form of place is sound, is song; it lies in the process of language. If we think about how we evolved, there is the structure of the murmuring language of the mother, which in fact is an architectural form in which we dwell and in which we have evolved. Super interesting.
Sound, in a way, is like Francesco Careri's interpretation – I've always loved this – that the first form of human architecture was walking: tracing places from point A to point B, leaving a trail, a line, even before construction, creating those steps. And yet, before that there is sound; before that there is volume in our voice, in our singing, in our babbling.

PF: In that sense we can also talk about magic. I mean: the word creates, the word generates. "Abracadabra", exactly. I also think of Harry Potter who, with his magic wand and a series of words, creates things that do not exist, makes things happen, makes things move, even makes appear things that are not there. So, in a way he creates volumes. With the volume of his voice he creates volumes. Let's return to the world of design. In your opinion, are there actions – we might even call them tricks of the trade – that allow you to create magic, to create something that is not there? For example, since we're at the Ferré Center: there are forms here that seem impossible, magical. I'm thinking of the white organza shirts, of the geometric two-dimensional shapes that become three-dimensional. It looks like magic at first sight, but behind it there is technique, method, work, research, dedication – all the things we love about design. If we leave fashion aside and talk about product design, are there mechanisms that you use which allow you to give form, volume and substance to magic?

SR: My goodness, what a wonderful question – it has everything inside it. When you walk in here, even before seeing a jewel, a drawing, a garment, you feel research, culture, vision, obsession. I always say that creativity is a muscle: it must be trained. We need to be curious, to fill ourselves with stimuli without sinking into the pathology of dispersion, staying instead on a path of deep dedication, of putting elements together. Because we are all great alchemists, like in tarot card number one. The tarot are very important here. Card zero is The Fool, who is lost, who gets scattered – another fundamental stage. But at a certain point card number one, The Magician, appears. Wherever we want to go, we have to begin in the same way: by putting all the elements we have on the table. What are your elements – your cultural, emotional, character traits that are essential for bringing your unique quality into the world?
Gianfranco Ferré was incredible because he brought his architectural vein into fashion, his ap-

petite, his… let's say, his gourmand side into work that appears sober and sinful at the same time. Wonderful.
So when we begin, we need to put all these elements together. At the start we must not be afraid of getting things wrong: we have to start understanding doses along our path. At the beginning, yes, you will create design Frankensteins, but that's right. You have to go through a bit of horror in order to give birth to something of your own, after a deep gestation.
And yes, "abracadabra": I create as I speak. Reality is what you manage to create with your visions, whether textual or three-dimensional. It demands research and mistakes. It's beautiful that "to err" means both to wander and to make errors. Fundamental. Then, at a certain point, you begin to understand doses, because magic, in my view, is a question of dosage. A great chef uses ingredients that we could also use, and yet it is the doses and the way those ingredients are used that make something special and extraordinary. People are moved because they can feel that you have done that research and that you have managed to find the right proportions of your ingredients and offer them to others.

PF: Sara, is there a design classic in which volume played a crucial role in defining both aesthetics and functionality? An object that we all know which, in your view, best expresses the dimension of volume?

SR: There is an object I have at home which I picked up early on. As a student I used to go and visit the great masters, practically by pretending to be a journalist. In Naples I contacted Riccardo Dalisi, because I had a little crush on this figure whom another of my great masters, Alessandro Guerriero, had told me about. Guerriero said to me: "Sara, if you want to meet him, invent a way." So I called Riccardo: "I'm coming, I'm doing an interview." I went and found myself in his house, which is something extraordinary. I still get goosebumps thinking about it, because you enter a world made of divisions, of things that go beyond – beyond the everyday, beyond money, beyond… it's a life mission, a mission of thought.
So I walked and walked and walked, and I came across this object that was a kind of compass. Imagine it at a slightly bigger scale, about fifty centimetres tall. I said: "Maestro, what is this?" – I'm tempted to imitate his Neapolitan. And he answered: "Sara, this is the kissing compass. Here, here, take it in your hands, see how it works. Look – when people are close together…" And he brought the compass legs together, closing it. "Look how they come together in a kiss, look at the passion. And then you move them apart…" You opened the compass: one leg with the point, the other with the pencil. Inside, as in many of his objects, there was metalwork, and on one leg there was the silhouette of a person, a woman, and on the other the silhouette of a man, of another person. "Look – when they move apart… You put it down and look at the beautiful circle they draw together, because love exists even at a distance. Perfect circles are drawn together both close up and far away, together in a kiss."
I don't know if that comes across, but there is this compass that creates this extraordinary circle from two elements that hold each other in the attention of being together even when they are apart. This is a vision of life; it is an object. At university they filled my head with "form follows function". Fine – but I'd like to say "form follows poetry": understanding that, for me, that object was the starting point for beginning to design with an apparatus, an ergonomics of emotion that that man, in that object, had given me.

PF: What advice would you give a young designer on how to work effectively with volume in their projects? How can you gain control over it?

SR: First of all, by losing control. That's it. I often see that everyone – or at least many of the students I meet in my workshops and classes – is terrified of changing forms and volumes. Possibilities are locked into predefined shapes.
One of the most interesting exercises they had us do at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, where I spent some time, was to change the scale of objects by creating collages in a very instinctive, visceral way. Because sometimes it's more complex to work directly with matter. And so you would enlarge a handle, stretch something, open something up, and you would create these horrible cut-and-paste monsters which, in this loss of meaning, created a new direction: "Wait – this bit interests me. Let's explore it more, let's go deeper."
To have control you also have to lose control, always knowing how to decode the doses. But it's essential to be able to open things up. Design is like a bellows: to channel a sound it needs to open wide and fill with oxygen, and then close and emit the note. So my advice to young people is really this: take in oxygen. Don't be afraid to bring in possibilities and novelties – with enthusiasm, with desire. There is such a castration of desire around… be careful. Then of course we teachers help you to discipline it. But it's important that, in order to find the right balance of your volumes, you go through this process.

PF: Thank you, Sara. Thank you for sharing these reflections with us.

SR: Thank you. Volumetric greetings!

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