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# The Commodity of Trade in Contemporary Design

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**Abstract:** The recent growth of festivals, media, and events associated the design industry has had a major impact on the way we conceive, produce, distribute and consume design. This is reflected in the way designers now work, which includes preparing photo-shoots, organizing exhibitions, and creating and disseminating press release materials. Similarly, the network of actors involved has changed, as has the trade of expertise and services they offer. Typically, this includes photographers, commissioning agents, curators, patrons, journalists, and PR personnel amongst others. This research expands the notion of conventional design processes, highlighting the key roles that media and event organizers now play in contemporary design. This research provides significant insights on the nature of a designer's media profile within the contemporary design industry. In so doing, the authors have developed two tools for analyzing contemporary design processes and the trade occurring in commissioned design projects that will be presented in the paper.

**Keywords:** Design process, design critique, trade, media, visualization tools

## 1. Introduction

The media industry (*i.e.* TV, media and Internet) has grown significantly in recent years. Today, it has a massive impact in the way we search for information, build personal and collective memories and represent our society. From sports to politics, lifestyle and education, everything is impacted by the media and has to adapt accordingly. The design industry is no exception. In recent times, the design community has witnessed an increasing number of designers working on products that reach the market only as limited editions, or one-off pieces sold in auctions or through exclusive galleries (Blythe *et al.*, 2015). These objects have gained great visibility on the media and in design events, reaching a broad audience of readers and visitors, rather than through traditional commercial routes. Evidence of this phenomenon is in the growth of visitors and journalists attending design festivals like the Salone del Mobile in Milan (Figure 1) and in design blogs and websites, such as Dezeen and Designboom, which can count millions of monthly visitors.



the communication, positioning and branding of their practice, they are well aware of the functioning of the industry they operate in. This is the main reason for their involvement in this study. The six designers are:

- Hella Jongerius, based in Berlin;
- FormaFantasma, based in Amsterdam;
- Minale-Maeda, based in Rotterdam;
- Chris Kabel, based in Rotterdam;
- Mischer'Traxler, based in Vienna;
- Lanzavecchia + Wai, based in Pavia (Italy) and Singapore.

Since the research focuses on the media trade occurring in these designers' working processes, the commissioners involved have been included in the study. Because designers receive commissions from a variety of organizations, the sampling of the case studies tried to include such diversity in the research. So, the selected commissioners are:

- Phaidon Publishers, London;
- Fondazione Plart Museum of Plastics, Naples;
- Droog design brand, Amsterdam;
- Witte de With and Tent Art institutions , Rotterdam;
- Carwan Design Gallery , Milan and Beirut;
- Mercedes-Benz automotive brand, Stuttgart.

Each of the six case studies focused on commissions that resulted in furniture and household products, produced in small quantities, but exhibited and published internationally (Figure 3).

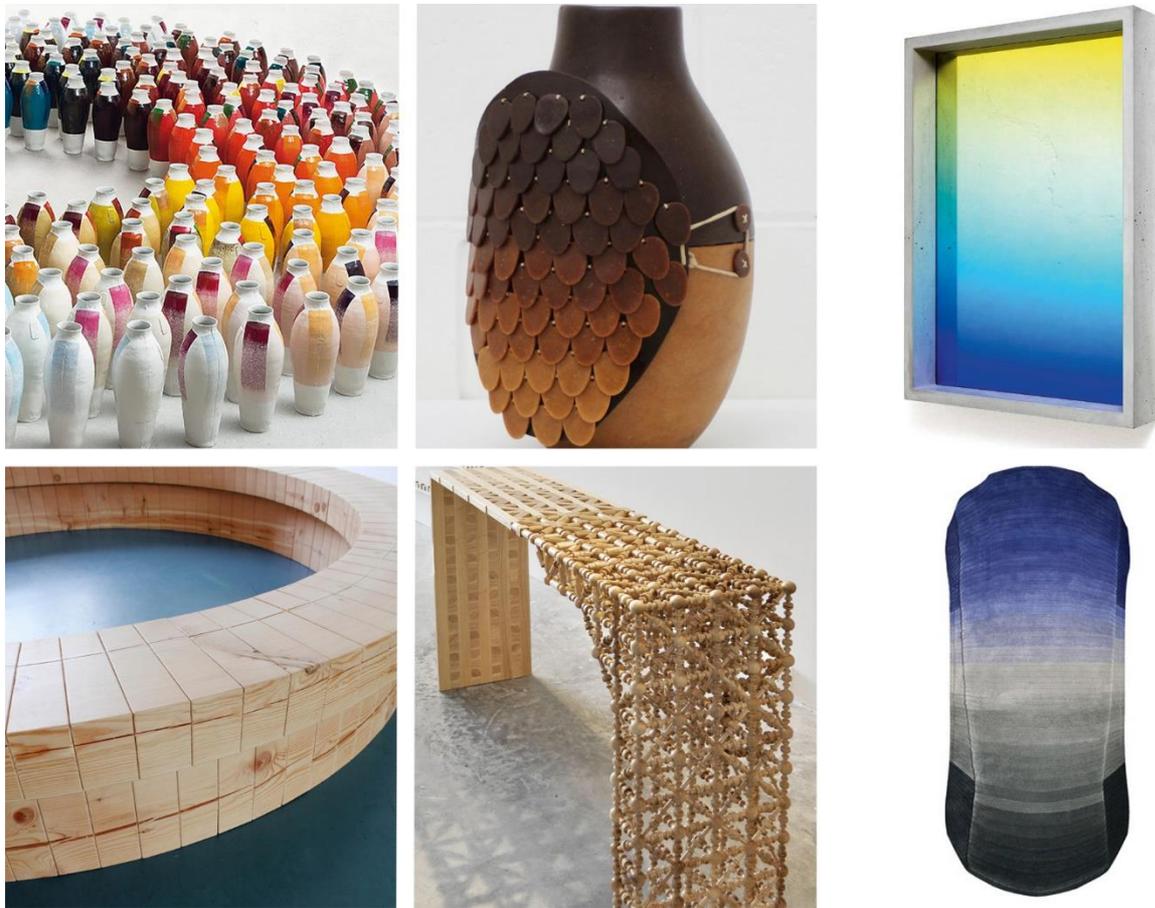


Figure 3. From top-left in clockwise order: *Misfit* by Hella Jongerius for Phaidon, *Botanica* by FormaFantasma for Plart, *Dusk/Dawn* by Minale-Maeda for Droog, *Wood Ring Bench* by Chris Kabel for Witte de With and Tent, *Mashrabiya* by Misher' Traxler for Carwan, *Streamline* by Lanzavecchia+Wai for Mercedes.

Each designer and commissioner was interviewed individually. Each interview, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, unpicked the key stages of the commission, with some questions touching upon the media attention gathered by the projects and how this attention was considered by both designers and commissioners. Interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

As the data were collected, transcribed and coded, the need for visualizing the information became apparent. The visualization process would at times make evident the necessity for a reduction of the data being taken into account; whilst at other times they suggested potential interpretations. The criteria adopted to visually organize the resulting graphs and maps suggested operations of data filtering, thus becoming part of the methodology of the analysis (Yau, 2013). Data display is an effective way for data reduction and visual graphs can help detect patterns during the analyses (Robson, 2002; Yin, 2003; Cairo, 2013).

The information gathered in both the designer and commissioner interviews was divided between excerpts concerning the design process and excerpts concerning the trade. In order to visualize and analyze the information about the process and the trade, two visual tools have been created and tested. For the design process, a *Process Chart* was chosen as the most effective tool to visualize and analyze how the commissions unfolded; while for the trade, a *Trade Map* was used to track the exchange of resources, skills, competences and services among key actors. In the following sections, the two tools are described in further detail.

### 3. Process Charts

The *Process Chart* facilitates the organization of quotes extracted from the interviews according to the typology of outcome and the design stage they refer to. Each *Process Chart* comprises two axes. The horizontal axis represents time and divides the process along five conventional design process stages (Ulrich and Eppinger, 2004), namely *Commission*, *Design*, *Production*, *Distribution* and *Consumption*. The vertical axis shows three outcomes that selected commissions generated, whether directly or indirectly namely a three-dimensional artefact (*Piece*), exhibitions (*Display*) and printed and screen-based visuals (*Image*). The template for the Process Chart is shown in Figure 4.

PIECE					
DISPLAY					
IMAGE					
	COMMISSION	DESIGN	PRODUCTION	DISTRIBUTION	CONSUMPTION

Figure 4. *Process Chart Template.*

As a tool, the *Process Chart* facilitates the visual organization of information relating to the design process of each interview. By simply cutting quotes from the transcripts and pasting them in the *Process Chart* template, the information was organized in an intuitive way. Observing the *Process Chart* then, it was straightforward to find the relevant quotes about certain outcomes by referring to the various stages of the design process (Figure 5).

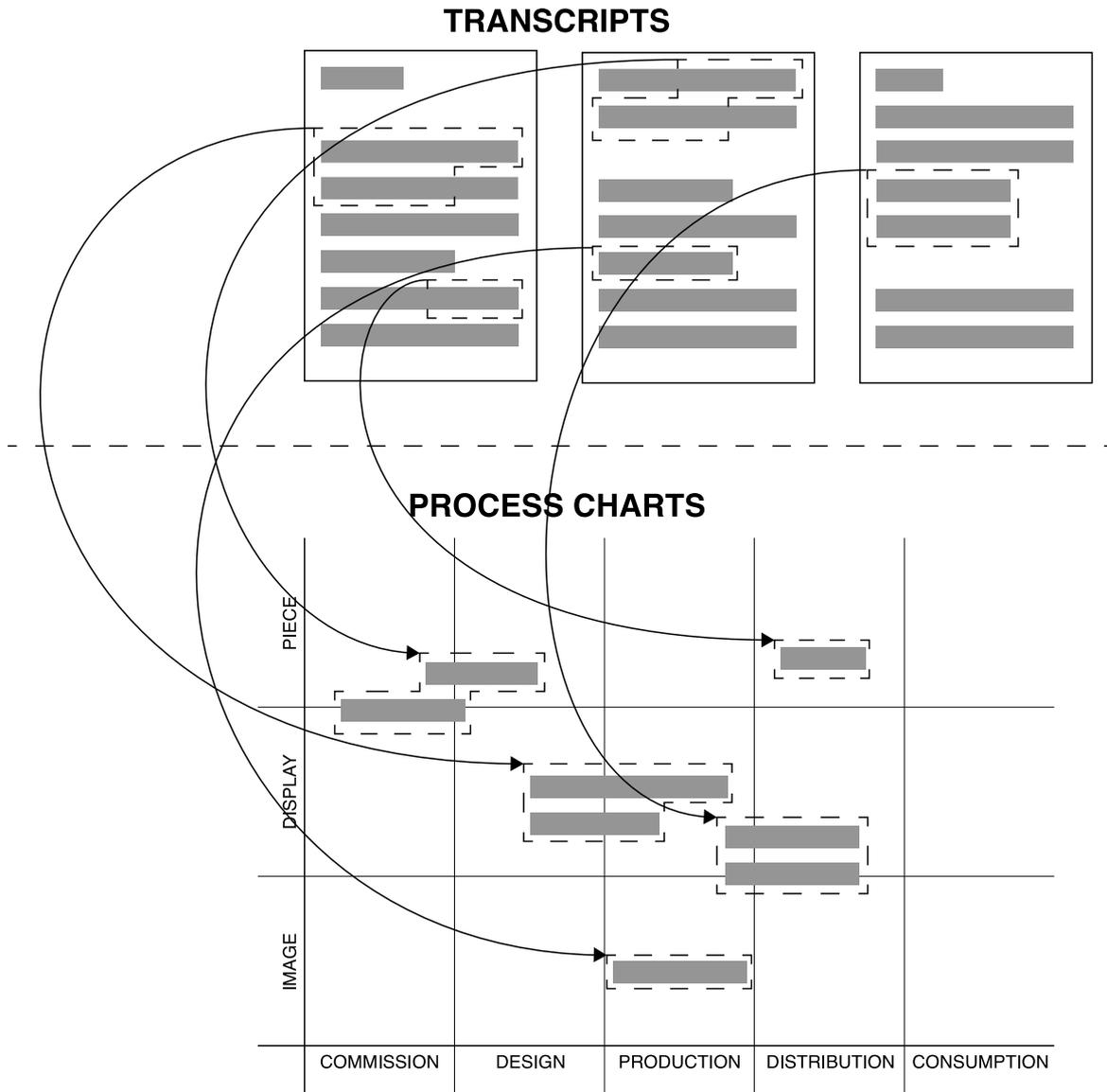


Figure 5. A scheme illustrating the quotes being transposed in the Process Chart.

Furthermore, while compiling the *Process Charts*, it was evident that the three different outcomes (*Piece, Display, Image*) where all interconnected with many quotes referring to more than one outcome and more than one design phase. Such quotes were placed at the crossing of two, three or four quadrants. So, for example, when design duo Mischer’Traxler talk about their commission from Carwan Gallery by saying:

*“[...] it was clear that they would have liked something for interior use and also something that can sell. They gave us a list of what they already have, so it was clear it would have been good if we don’t make a second product.”*  
 (Mischer’Traxler)

This quote was mainly included in the *Piece-Commission* quadrant, but because the quote also hints at clear design instructions (i.e., interior use, not a second product), the text of the quote crossed the *Piece-Design* quadrant (Figure 6).

PIECE	it was clear that they would have liked something for interior use and also something that can sell. they gave us a list of what they already have, so it was clear it would have been good if we don't make a second product.				
DISPLAY					
IMAGE					
	COMMISSION	DESIGN	PRODUCTION	DISTRIBUTION	CONSUMPTION

Figure 6. A quote placed in the Piece-Commission quadrant and overflowing in the Piece-Design quadrant.

On other occasions, the quotes were referring not - or not only - to two different phases of the process, but also to two different outcomes. For example, when Mischer'Traxler talk about their participation in the "Design Days Dubai" Design Fair they say:

*"One [Mashrabiya Sideboard] was made for Dubai and it was sold in Dubai."*

*(Mischer'Traxler)*

This quote was placed between the tier concerning the *Piece* and the one concerning the *Display*. The reason for this decision is because the designers refer to their work as both an object for sale and an exhibition piece for the "Design Days Dubai" festival (Figure 7).

PIECE					
DISPLAY			One [Mashrabiya Sideboard] was made for Dubai and it was sold in Dubai.		
IMAGE					
	COMMISSION	DESIGN	PRODUCTION	DISTRIBUTION	CONSUMPTION

Figure 7. A quote placed between the tiers Piece and Display and the columns Production and Distribution.

When quotes were referring at the same time to two outcomes (*i.e.* Piece and Display), they were representative of a change in the design process that now includes not only the artefacts but also their representation in exhibitions or photographs. Having to select the quotes and to place the most meaningful ones among the quadrants of the *Process Chart* pushed the researchers to make decisions about filtering data and how to begin to analyse them. Graphically, the *Process Charts* simplified the display of the data, but also the retrieval of the quotes as they were organized by their content, like the design phase and the outcome they referred to.

Each *Process Chart* is created as follows:

1. Create a Cartesian diagram where the horizontal axis represents time, divided among *Commission, Design, Production, Distribution* and *Consumption*. On the vertical axis list the three by-products the commission has generated, namely the *Piece, Display* and *Image*.
2. Highlight in the transcript all the parts that describe the process of the commission as seen from the interviewee.
3. Insert all the quotes about design process in the graph.
4. Organize the quotes among the appropriate quadrants of the graph. Quotes can also go across multiple quadrants if they are related to more phases of the process, or to more than one outcome.

### 3.1 Reflecting on Process Charts

In order to provide a general view on how the interviewees discussed the process of the commissions, the 12 *Process Charts* were merged. Here, we substituted the quotes with black rectangles with low opacity so to identify patterns in the way designers and commissioners talk

about the process according to its phases (*Commission, Design, Production, Distribution and Consumption*) and outcomes (*Piece, Display, Image*). The result was a cloud-like diagram, as shown in Figure 8. The chart shows a descending trend across the frame in the way the interviewees relate about the process of undertaking the commissions. Thus, seeing a progressive shift of attention from the *Piece* to the *Image*, throughout the process of undertaking the commissions.



Figure 8. All quotes replaced with low-opacity black boxes to identify density and trends.

### 3.2 The Piece

Commissions always start with the presumption of an artifact, and the *Commission, Design* and *Production* phases of the *Piece*, are the most occupied ones. The interviews have revealed that there are several reasons sparking a commission. Sales are not always the reason for *Commissioners* to engage with *Designers*. This aspect appears clearly in the case study of Mercedes-Benz and Case da Abitare who selected a number of designers to take on Mercedes-Benz's identity and develop it into a collection to present in a touring exhibition. The design works are usually conceived in great autonomy. The designers are let free to think of what to design. Mariette Dölle says Chris Kabel was given "150% autonomy", Emilia Terragni of Phaidon describes as "total" the creative independence granted to Hella Jongerius. Furthermore, from the interviews we have learned that designers are usually in charge of the production of their pieces.

### 3.3 The Display

More interesting are the observations that can be made in relation to the *Display* of the artefacts. The *Display* of the artefacts plays an important role in the *Distribution* of the commission outcomes. However, looking at the *Process Chart*, it is noticeable how the *Display* and the *Piece* blend into each other, with many statements of the interviewees occupying the intersection between the two tiers (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Quotes between the tiers *Piece* and *Display* highlighted in red. The blending of *Piece* into *Display* is representative of the attention given to exhibitions and events.

The fact that some statements fall between the tier concerning the *Piece* and the one concerning the *Display* is symptomatic of the crucial role played by design events in the *Commission*, *Design* and *Production* phases of the *Pieces*. The case study of Minale-Maeda and Droog is explicatory of the strong relation between the *Piece* and the *Display*. In fact the participation of Droog in the Salone del Mobile of Milan and Design Miami/Basel is the main purpose behind the commission. As Marielle Janmaat from Droog explains:

*“For the [Salone del Mobile of] Milan’s project “Saved by Droog” we had the brief and we had a pool of products [...], we presented the all package to a group of designers, which was selected of course.”*

*(Marielle Janmaat)*

In proximity of Design Miami/Basel instead, it was Minale-Maeda who proactively suggested

*“For Design Miami/Basel [...] we told them [Droog]: “why don’t we do something with the material we developed for Saved by Droog?” And they [Droog] have accepted our first proposal”*

*(Mario Minale)*

The critical role of design events in commissioning the *Designers* appears again among the other case studies. Fondazione Plart includes the participation to the Salone del Mobile of Milan within the offerings for the commission. Similarly Mercedes-Benz invites the designers with the explicit aim of including the outcomes in the “Meet Talents” exhibition. Therefore, it can be stated that the participation in design events is made explicit at the beginning of the commissions. In some cases it can be observed that if there were no design event (*i.e.* Design Miami/Basel, Salone del Mobile of Milan), there would have been no commission. Design events often represent the main reason for

commissions to take place. The *Display* of the artefacts is therefore one essential part of the commission, even affecting the *Design* and *Production* of the *Pieces*. The thin line separating the Piece from the *Display* becomes even fuzzier when Andrea Trimarchi of FormaFantasma describes Botanica as:

*“an installation more than physical objects.”*

*(Andrea Trimarchi)*

The fact that the commission started with the idea of being exhibited in Milan, pushed the designers to think of it as an exhibition, thus featuring samples, illustrations and the artefacts. Commissions are therefore about artefacts, as much as about exhibitions. Hence, design events have an impact on the *Design* and *Production* process.

### 3.4 The Image

The *Process Chart* shows how the interviewees relate about the *Image*. The number of quotes in the lower tier relating about the Image throughout the process phases, denotes the importance that is given to the visual outcome of commissions (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Quotes referring to the Image highlighted in red. The abundance of statements in this tier reflect the attention give to the Image as an output of the commission.

The interviews revealed that the *Designers* are often directly involved in the photo shoots. Designers often choose to take care of the *Design* and *Production* of the photos. Chris Kabel refused the photos taken by his commissioner Tent, because *“it wasn’t selling the idea well”*. He preferred to invest in photographic equipment and take his own picture of the Wood Ring Bench. Lanzavecchia and FormaFantasma use their own entrusted photographers. All this denotes a great awareness of the designers about the role played by the *Image*. Photos are more than portraits, they often are expressive interpretations of the artefacts. The Wood Ring Bench is portrayed from above, a

perspective that no one would have in real life. The carpet of Lanzavecchia+Wai representing the silhouette of a Mercedes SLS is photographed with one of the designers lying underneath the carpet as if he is fixing it (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Photos of Streamline carpet and Wood Ring bench distributed by the designers to the media.

All the designers are extremely careful in crafting the content for communication materials. Hella Jongerius involved graphic designer Irma Boom for the design of the book published by commissioner Phaidon illustrating the project. Chris Kabel hired a writer to write his profile. FormaFantasma state that they prepare their press releases so that any journalist or blogger can copy-paste the content and republish it.

Beyond *Production and Design*, *Designers* are also involved in the *Distribution of the Image*. *Designers* appear to be the gateway to the media. Chris Kabel uses the postcards printed by Witte de With and Tent bearing the image of the Wood Ring Bench to update his contacts, starring MoMA director Paola Antonelli among others. The network of the *Designers* is extended and includes important actors. Mario Minale highlights this aspect. The interesting part about the image of Minale-Maeda's Dusk / Dawn Mirror lays in its distribution on Wallpaper magazine as the mirror is awarded "best mirror 2011" by the Wallpaper editorial team. Such an award is a result of Minale-Maeda's dissemination of their updates through their network, which includes the editor of Wallpaper. The award, about which also Marielle Janmaat of Droog happily relates, is therefore a consequence of Minale-Maeda's contacts. Also FormaFantasma say that they can easily get their work published thanks to their network, while their commissioners struggle to do so. Designers often appeared as the gateway to the media. They are the amplifier, the PR office of their commissioners.

This is a service that designers provide and that emerged in the analysis of the trade described in the following sections.

## 4. Trade Maps

While analyzing the 12 interviews it was evident that a visualization of the information about trade was necessary. By analyzing the transcripts on what concerns the trade occurring in the commission and categories of commodities emerged.

The seven typologies of actors are:

- *Designers*, they are the sampled designers that undertook the selected commissions.
- *Commissioners*, they are the sampled commissioners that instigated the commission.
- *Agents of Media Profile*, they are media-representatives or hosts of events.
- *Enablers*, those contributing with technical, economical or creative support. This category includes, sponsors, craftsmen and producers, collaborators of sort.
- *Other Creatives*, they can be artists or designers mentioned by the interviewees.
- *Schools*, they are the educational institutes mentioned in the interviews.

From the interviews it emerged that these actors exchange 5 types of commodities:

- *Autonomy*, intended as one's granted independence to decide and act.
- *Visibility*, which is the prominence to an audience.
- *Reputation*, as the rise in terms of status.
- *Financial Value*, as economic advantage.
- *Personal Reward*, one's satisfaction or personal gratification.

*Trade Maps* were compiled by placing all the named actors on a sheet, arranged according to the category they belong to. Then, each time a statement was interpreted by the researchers as a trade amongst the actors, a color-coded arrow was traced connecting the two or more actors involved. The arrows were then labeled with the time in which the statement was recorded, so that it was always possible to track back the sentence (Figure 12). *Trade Maps* have proved particularly effective in organizing information and detecting the actors and networks involved in each commission.

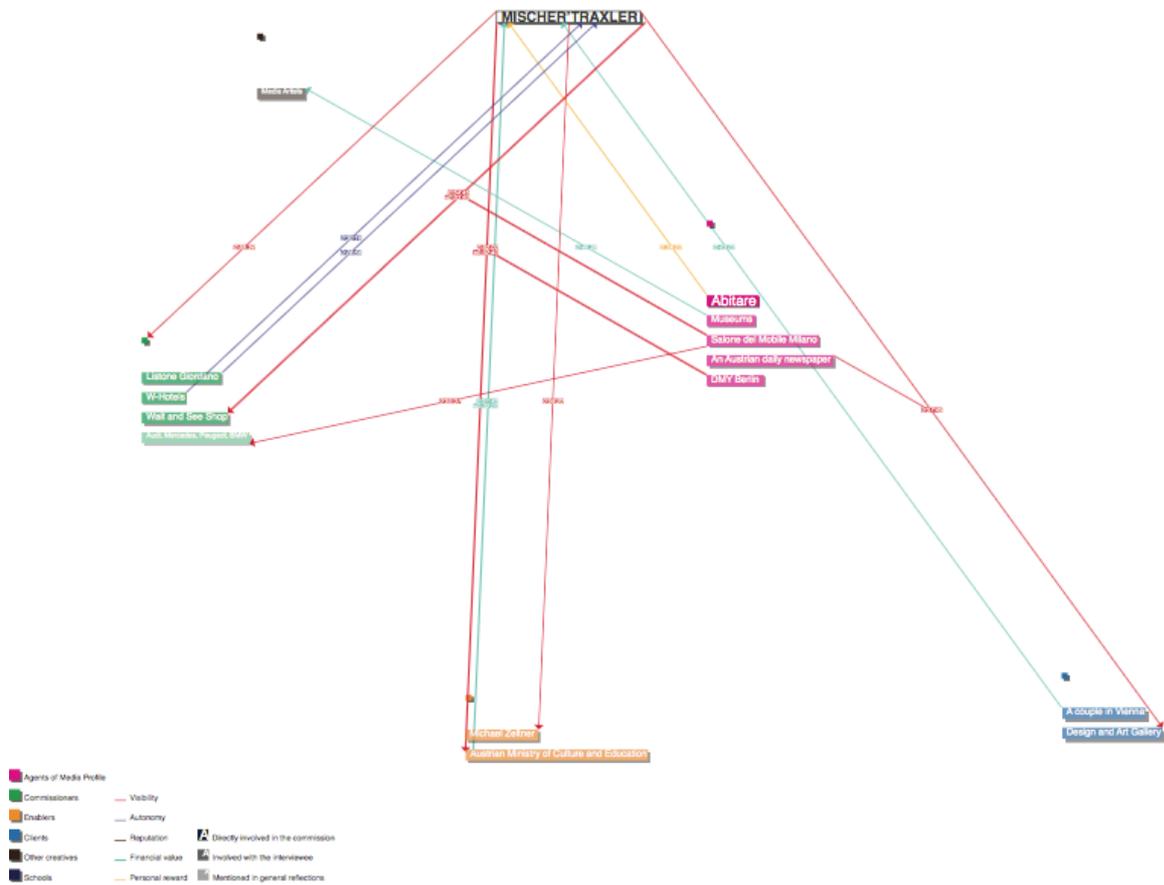


Figure 12. An example of Trade Map resulting from an interview.

## 4.1 Reflecting on Trade Maps

For each interview a *Trade Map* has been produced, and each case study analyzed individually. Next, all the *Trade Maps* have been simplified by merging arrows that indicate the trade of the same commodities among the same actors, and increasing the arrow thickness by 1pt for each merged arrow. The result is shown in Figure 13.



Figure 13. The simplified map comprising all the interviews.

## 4.2 Autonomy

*Autonomy* appears evident in the trade between *Commissioners* and *Designers*, with its direction going from the former to the latter (Figure 14). Every case study has highlighted a remarkable *Autonomy* allowed to the *Designers*. *Autonomy* is most often of a creative nature. This suggests that *Designers* were often let free to propose whatever outcome they wanted. Besides this creative *Autonomy*, in three cases also a commercial *Autonomy* was agreed upon. Commercial *Autonomy* translates in the possibility for the *Designers* to use the outcome of the commission for their own purposes. Chris Kabel and FormaFantasma were given any percentage of the earning. Also Lanzavecchia + Wai were given the right to sell their designs before the end of 2013. Therefore, it can be observed that *Designers* are often let free to develop commercial strategies for the outcomes of the commissions independently. Finally, also a managerial *Autonomy* emerges from the case studies. This is very evident in Hella Jongerius' case where she imposes a manufacturer, a graphic designer and a writer. Similarly, Minale-Maeda selected their own producer and proposed it to Droog.

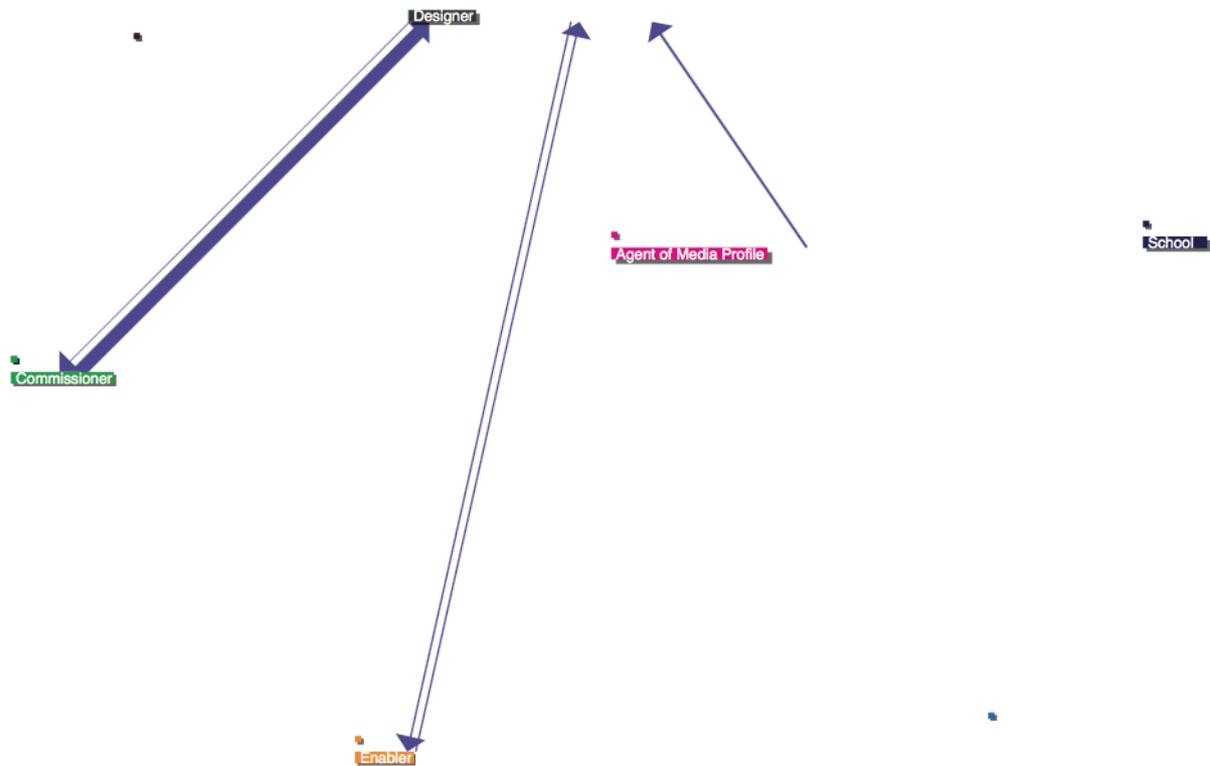


Figure 14. The Trade Map showing the exchange of Autonomy among actors.

### 4.3 Financial Value

In the final *Trade Map*, the thick turquoise arrow from the *Commissioners* to the *Designers* stands out clearly (Figure 15). Turquoise stands for *Financial Value*. If one merely looks at the map, it would seem that *Designers* are earning a lot of money from commissions. This is not the case. For a deeper understanding of this exchange, it is necessary to remember that *Financial Value* does not always correspond to money. In some cases it is the support in terms of expertise and time that the *Commissioners* make available to the *Designers*. Most of the times *Commissioners* make available a budget that covers production costs only. In some cases (e.g. Chris Kabel, the budget is not even enough to cover production. However, the *Designers* are often free to exploit the project and capitalize afterwards thanks to the *Autonomy* granted to them. *Financial Value* also appears as a trade from the *Agents of Media Profile* to the *Designers*. It emerged, from the interviews, how exhibiting in certain venues increases the value of the designers' works. Also, this arrow includes the fees paid by museums to the designers to exhibit their works.

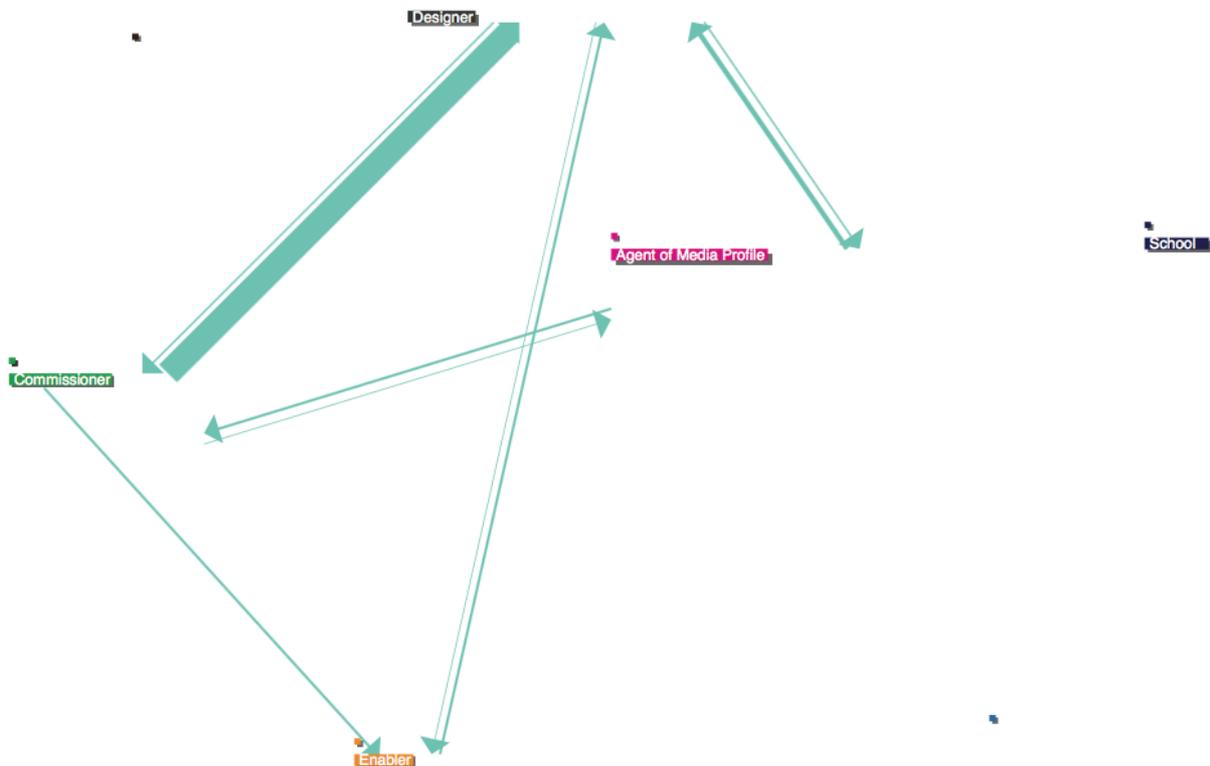


Figure 15. The Trade Map showing the exchange of Financial Value among actors.

#### 4.4 Visibility

In the *Trade Map*, *Visibility* appears as mainly distributed by the *Agents of Media Profile*, while a collateral exchange takes place between *Designers* and *Commissioners* (Figure 16). In reality, the exchange of *Visibility* between *Designers* and *Commissioners* is strongly related to the distribution of *Visibility* operated by the *Agents of Media Profile*. That is why, in every case, the trade of *Visibility* between *Commissioners* and *Designers*, saw also the involvement of the *Agents of Media Profile*. As the commissions are completed, the *Designers* benefit in terms of *Visibility* because the *Commissioners* often organize openings and publications to make the commission public. For example, Chris Kabel clearly defines the commission as a “stage or a pedestal” that he uses to launch a product, though he does not have a commercial plan for it. For him the commission by Witte de With and Tent represents an opportunity to show the Wood Ring Bench he designed. Through the case studies it is clear that *Commissioners* are generally concerned with *Visibility* and organizing openings and publications. After all, it is in their own interest to advertise the collaboration and spread their name. While *Commissioners* seem to offer *Visibility* at an initial stage, as the commission is completed *Designers* extend the cycle of *Visibility*. This happens mainly through the credits that the *Designers* reserve to their *Commissioners* each time the design works are exhibited or published, or during interviews. Such agreements tend to be informal. Mariette Dölle asked Chris Kabel to mention the name of Witte de With and Tent when possible. So, when the Wood Ring Bench is exhibited at the Dutch Design Week, it carries with it the name of its commissioner. Fondazione Plart operated in a similar manner with FormaFantasma who make their Botanica collection tour “like a pop star”, to say it in the words of the designers. The association of Fondazione Plart with FormaFantasma and interviews have spread the name of the commissioner together with the one of the designers. Thus, *Designers* operate as PR offices of sort, distributing communication materials to their extended network of media representative. FormaFantasma and Minale-Maeda are great examples of this, with the former assuring their commissioner about the publication on requested

websites and the latter sending their press releases to Wallpaper magazine and eventually getting an award from the editorial board.

Hella Jongerius says it clearly: *“If the project is ending, there is an end result. But the last result is the press”*. Ultimately, *Visibility* is an aim for both *Designers* and *Commissioners*.

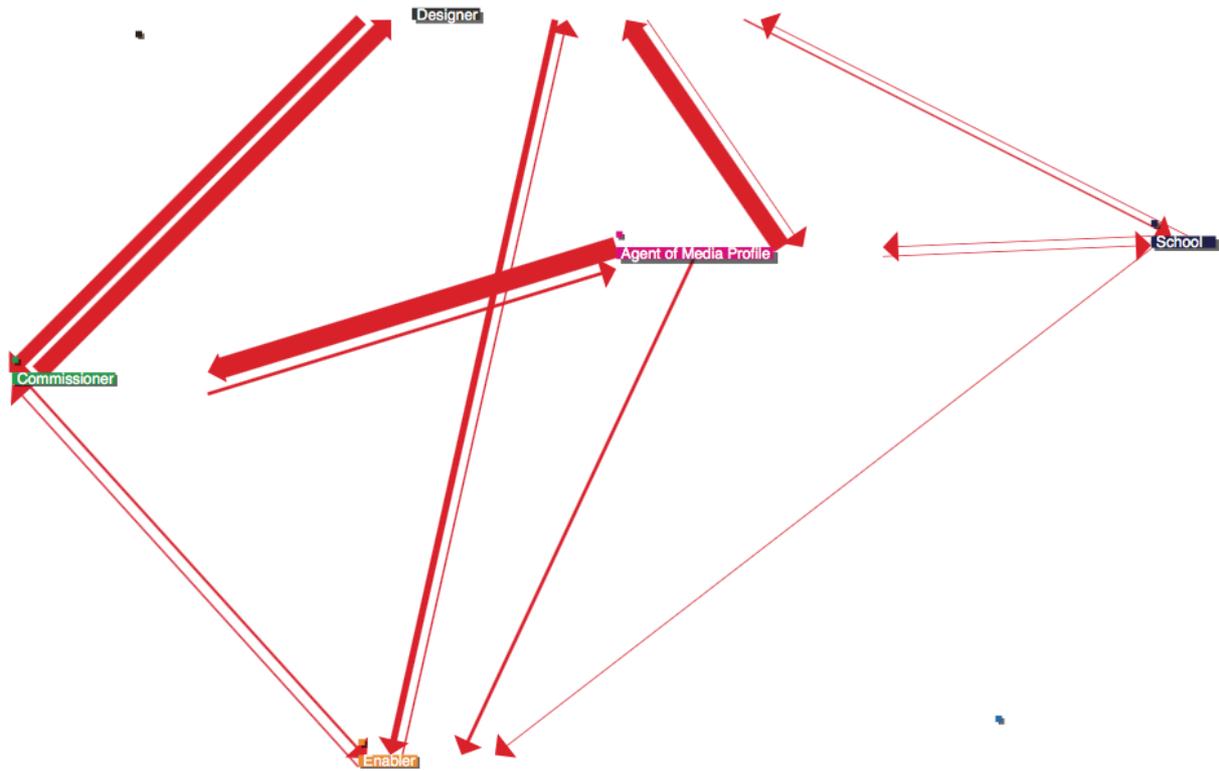


Figure 16. *The Trade Map showing the exchange of Visibility among actors.*

## 4.5 Reputation

*Reputation* is traded in a similar manner to *Visibility* (Figure 17). *Commissioners* regularly benefit from the *Designers’* “*cultural allure*”, which Hella Jongerius refers to. Cultural allure is what makes *Designers* appealing to the media and *Commissioners*. For example, the *Reputation* that Chris Kabel has built for himself is an important commodity he trades with *Clients* and *Commissioners*. He believes that they are “*chasing him more*” after his chair was acquired by MoMA, NYC. *Designers* are followed and supported by institutions and critics such as Paola Antonelli, Alice Rawsthorn, Giulio Cappellini, the Boijmans Museum, and so on. All these actors bring with themselves that cultural *Reputation* that *Designers* then trade, together with the resulting *Visibility*.

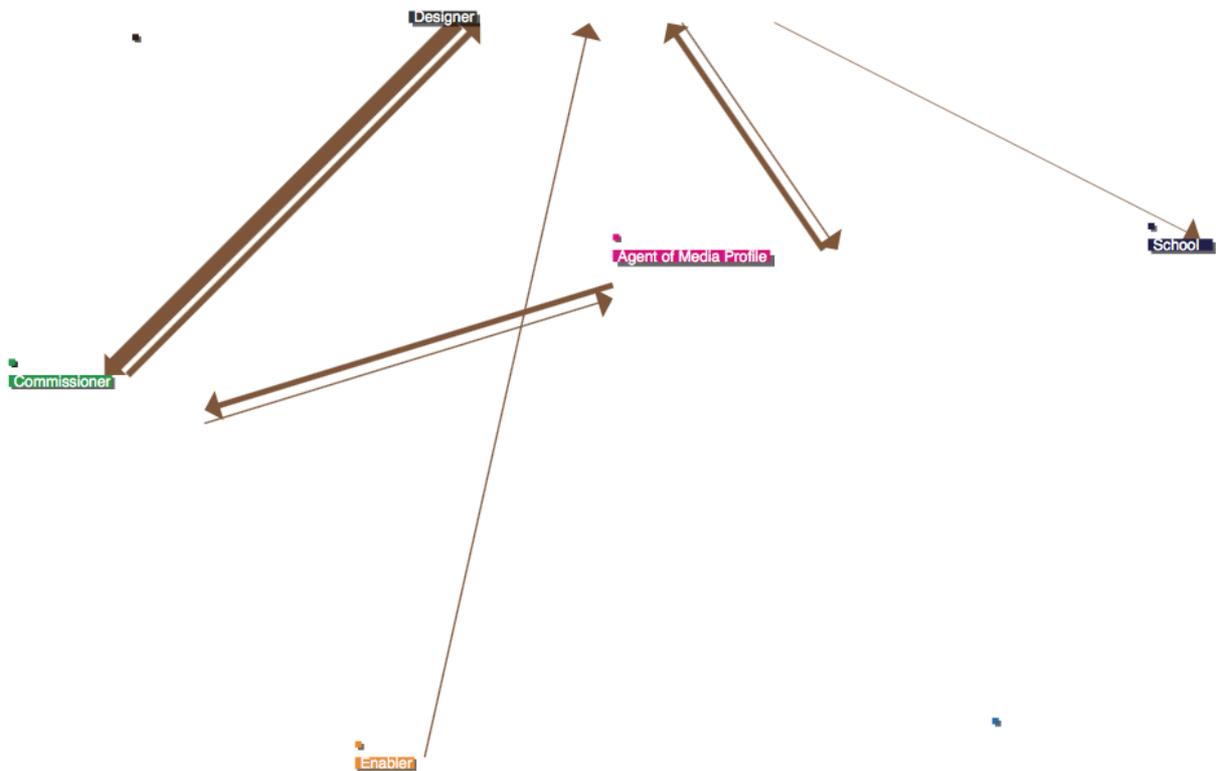


Figure 17. The Trade Map showing the exchange of Reputation among actors.

## 4.6 Personal Reward

Finally, *Personal Reward* is a consequence of such attention from authoritative *Agents of Media Profile*, giving legitimacy and prestige to the *Designers* and their work. *Designers* feel personally rewarded every time their work reaches an audience. In most cases this happens through mediated contexts (Figure 18). Whether it is the *Image* being spread in a newspaper, or visitors looking at the *Display* during design events, *Designers* appreciate the idea of entering the public's experience - especially those people outside the design community.

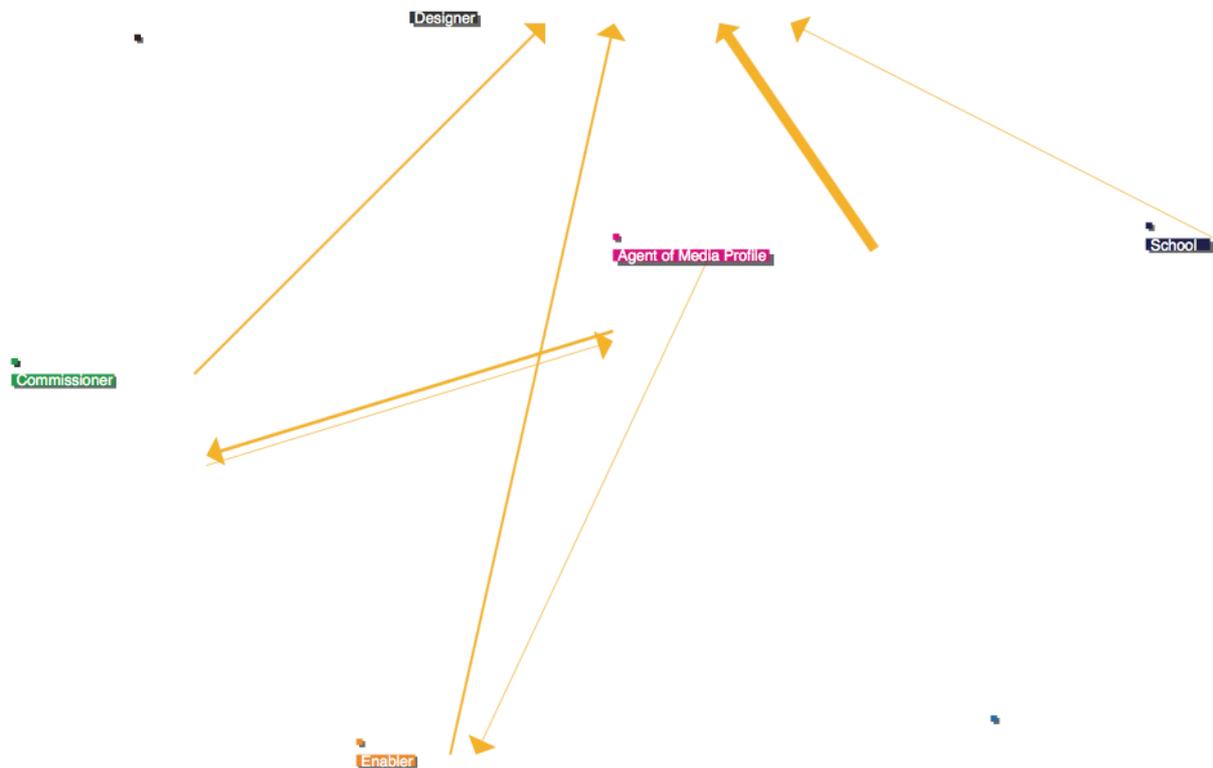


Figure 18. The Trade Map showing the exchange of Personal Reward among actors.

## 5. Conclusions

This research has highlighted how the network of actors taking part in contemporary design now routinely includes the media. The *Agents of Media Profile* - as defined in this research - provide validation and resonance, *Reputation* and *Visibility*. It is when projects are part of publication or events that the commission can be said to be completed. Design events also dictate a calendar of deadlines, becoming an integral part of the designer's process. The design process highlighted in this research expands considerably on conventional notions of design (e.g. Ulrich and Eppinger, 2004). Through the use of the *Process Charts*, this study has revealed the necessity of thinking about the *Display* of the artefact (i.e. its use in exhibitions) and its *Image* (i.e. photographs to be distributed). Evidently, designers and commissioners invest great resources for the ideation, production and distribution of those outputs.

The visual consumption of the designed item suggests an extension of the traditional design process to the point that stages like photo-shoots, generation of teasers, press releases, loans to exhibitions become streamlined within it. Consequently, the new contexts where design is represented have led to a paradigm shift in the profession of some designers. These professionals no longer deal with traditional actors like industrial manufacturers and distributors, but have to deal instead with a number of other actors such as curators, gallery directors, editors, exhibition designers and so on as crucial interlocutors for their activity. Also, designers now have to consider production and organizational expenses in their work. However, the great *Autonomy* granted to *Designers* allows them to exploit the outcome commercially, once commissions are completed.

The six case studies have highlighted the crucial role that *Visibility* and *Reputation* play in the design industry. The designed artefacts are circulated through media and exhibitions and once commissioners are credited, they can access cultural and commercial contexts such as museums, events and magazines, thus fostering *Visibility* and *Reputation*. The skills, networks and *Reputation* of

the designers themselves often facilitate this circulation where *Visibility* is the fuel of this industry. This research has framed contemporary design beyond the traditional contexts of factories and stores, highlighting how magazines and design events now represent the demand and the reward for designers and commissioners to create new work. This has deeply affected the design process as well as the trade with it, which now focuses on *Visibility* and *Reputation* as crucial commodities to be exchanged.

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