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ARTICLE

# The Design of Flexible Specialisation

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This article discusses the aesthetics of flexible specialisation, a form of labour marked by micro-enterprises, skilled artisans, flexible machinery, municipal welfare and strong kinship and subcultural networks. Focusing on the writing and projects of Nanni Strada and Andrea Branzi, the article describes the fate of this labour configuration within so-called 'Radical' design in the central and northeastern sections of Italy ('The Third Italy') during the 1970s. I look at how these practices were exported abroad and deteriorated in the face of increasing global competition. The article pays particular attention to the Soviet reception of Third Italy design and the reciprocal interest by Radical designers in Soviet Productivism in order to consider the persistent ideologies of third way production.

'Flexible specialisation' marks a type of labour in which the relations of production are distributed across a complex of firms. From the 1970s onwards, these complexes took shape within industrial districts, often on the outskirts of major cities across the United States, Western Europe and Japan. Firms shared materials, services and personnel, leading them to respond nimbly to shifting balances of supply and demand. With their newfound flexibility, they gained a foothold in global markets, particularly in industries that precluded economies of scale. By the 1980s, urban planners, cultural geographers and economic sociologists showed how industrial districts competed with but also supplied large corporations and state-owned enterprises, thereby complicating monolithic understandings of globalisation premised on multinational-driven market monopoly.

Since its inception, both proponents of and detractors from the flexible specialisation paradigm have often turned for evidence to a zone that stretches across the central and northern parts of Italy known as the 'Third Italy', whose districts are buttressed by intensive municipal welfare, kinship networks, and cultural ties. Third Italy districts rely on micro-enterprises, skilled artisans, and programmable machine tools in order to perpetually innovate their products and use their employees in agile ways. Their textile and garment industries are paradigmatic in these respects.

Building on their work, this article discusses the aesthetics of flexible specialisation. It focuses on the writing and projects of the designers Nanni Strada and Andrea Branzi that pertain to the production of clothing, which they occasionally called 'Dressing Design' over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. The study accounts for how working alongside likeminded 'Radical' designers, they devised products that engaged the emerging flexible means and relations of production. Having established theoretical and practical connections between design and flexible specialisation in the region, the article considers how designers reached foreign markets and exported new products and labour processes abroad. Exploring the historical ties between flexible specialisation, Productivism, and uneven development, the study pays particular attention to the Soviet reception of Third Italy clothing and the reciprocal interest by Radical designers in 'production clothing' (*prozodezhda*) – the textiles and costumes of the Russian historical avantgardes, which, taken together, contributed to a transcultural

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imaginary around revolutionary clothing design. The study concludes by sketching the deterioration of flexible specialisation in the face of increasing global competition and its repercussions for designers working today.

## Productivism and *Prozodezhda*

As the Italian Radical designers came to realise over the later postwar period, a key intellectual framework for considering how industrial design impinges on relations of production originates in Soviet Productivism, a movement that approached the mix of Soviet artisanal and industrial labour processes as a factor of Uneven and Combined Development over the course of the 1920s. In 1921, the leading Proletkul't theorist Osip Brik argued that it was precisely the artisanal character of work that prevented it from becoming monotonous, leading artists to find pleasure in the objects of their labour. Brik argued that artists should align themselves with engineers and carpenters, alongside metal and textile workers in order to cultivate an 'attentive and creative attitude toward the process of production.'[1] The following year in 1922, Brik's colleague, Boris Arvatov, penned a series of manifestos for the journal *Gorn*, which drew sharp contrasts to Brik's lingering attachments to individual creativity and artisanal production. Arvatov's productivist essays culminated in his book *Art and Production* (1926) – a touchstone eventually for the New Left's orientation to the Soviet historical avantgardes when it was translated into German in 1972 and then Spanish and Italian in 1973.[2]

Arvatov called on artists to abandon their former training in the handicrafts and the fine art academy in order to transform the quality and products of industrial labour at the site of the factory. In the face of worker exploitation and suppression under The New Economic Policy (NEP) (1921–8) and an antiquated Russian factory system with limited means, Arvatov argued that artists should reskill in order to become leading experts in engineering, science, and other 'socio-technical' purposes that proved relevant to industrial modernity.[3] Substituting artistic technique for 'general social technique', artists might apply socialist principles to the division of labour, thereby producing not exchangeable commodities for profit, but 'things' for the everyday (*byt*) needs and social importance of the collective.[4] As Arvatov put it, 'The object that has the highest quality, the most flexible and effective construction, the best form for realising its purpose, is the most perfect work of art.'

Production clothing became a key site for promoting 'flexibility' (*gibkost'*) in (1) the consumption of raw materials and the means of production – what Marx called 'productive consumption';[5] (2) the qualities and methods of production; (3) flexible uses for these de-commodified objects among socialist consumers. In her 1923 manifesto, *Today's Clothing – Prozodezhda*, Varvara Stepanova discussed the need for clothing that fit both the new collective tasks of the revolutionary worker and the capacity

[1] Osip Brik, 'V poryadke dnya', *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* (Art in Production) (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1921), 7–8; Maria Zalambani, 'L'art dans la production. Le débat sur le productivisme en Russie soviétique pendant les années vingt', *Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 1, 1/2 (1997), 41–61.

[2] Boris Arvatov, 'Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo', *Gorn*, 7, 2 (1922) 103–8 and 'Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo', *Gorn*, 8, 2 (1922), 119–31. These articles formed the basis for *Art and Production*: Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo*, (Moskow: Proletkul't, 1926), which was translated into Italian as Boris Arvatov, *Arte, produzione, e rivoluzione proletaria*, trans. Maria Olsùfieva and Oretta Michaelles (Rimini: Guaraldi, 1973). For an account of Arvatov's reception within the New Left: Halina Stephan, *Lef and the Left Front of the Arts* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1981). For an extensive discussion of how both late-Soviet and Western neo-avantgarde designers and their students came to terms with Productivism through combined processes of appropriation, dilution, veneration, and commodification: Yulia Karpova, *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s–80s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

[3] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 168.

[4] John Roberts, 'Introduction', in Boris Arvatov, *Art and Production,* eds. John Roberts and Alexei Penzin, trans. Shushan Avagyan (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 18; Boris Arvatov, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)', trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, 81 (1997), 119–28; Christina Kiaer, 'Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects', *October*, 81 (1997), 106–7.

[5] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 88–100.

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of new industrial machinery. The form of productivist garments would testify to the work that went into making them and fit the professional needs and activities of the wearer, whether in sport, engineering, or the manual trades.[6] Stepanova sought to eliminate embroidery and hand-sewn stitch work in favour of the highly visible seams produced by industrial sewing machines: '[Production clothing] industrialises the making of the costume and frees it from the mysteries of the charm of individual, handmade work of the tailor'.[7] Stepanova implicitly criticised the NEP's heavy subsidies for the handicraft industry, which had led to an abundance of traditional folk cloths, curtains, and linens.[8]

Like Stepanova, Arvatov was particularly dismayed by the returning vogue for artisanal handicrafts among the emergent, parasitic bourgeois class who benefitted from the semi-capitalist NEP reforms: 'The guild craftsman in his very essence is conservative; a petty-bourgeois idealisation of the middle ages, cultivated among members of the intelligentsia'.[9] The new Soviet bourgeoisie mystified the backsliding into capitalism through a stylistic regression into earlier stages of production: 'What we have now from art in the artisanal industry are the decaying relics of past magnificence, the last convulsions of backward technique, characteristic only of such an economically backward country as Russia, which still relied, in the era of feudalism, on cottage industry [*kustarnichestvo*]'.[10] Rather than seek inspiration from individuals or folk traditions, production clothing would take its cue from 'objective purposefulness and advanced technique', by which he meant the collective needs of workers in conjunction with their capacity to organise their labour through the most recent industrial technologies.[11]

The productivist break with artisanal production and consumption during NEP resonates in complicated ways with Leon Trotsky's retrospective account of Russia's Uneven and Combined Development in the lead-up to the Russian revolution.[12] For Trotsky, the distribution of cottage industry over far-flung regions of the realm demanded nomad traders who operated on the margins of peasant society rather than an urban bourgeoisie; and in the absence of proto-industrial centres of production and an entrepreneurial class that could develop and sustain them, Russia resorted to foreign direct investment from large capital, which developed its heavy industries and produced a centralised proletariat in its major cities. This 'artificial,' accelerated development exacerbated the internal stratification of the country and forestalled industrial democracy, effects that ultimately helped catalyse the revolution.[13]

Where Arvatov and his Left Front colleagues hoped to clear the ground of feudal and capitalist forms of production in order to establish a distinct proletarian culture, under Trotsky's model of Uneven and Combined Development, there was no point in speculating about the future or separating off proletarian culture from other historical stages. Rather, the proletariat was always already

[6] Varvara Stepanova, 'Kostyum segodnyashnego dnya – prozodezhda', *LEF*, 2 (1923), 65. For a detailed discussion of Stepanova's arguments vis-à-vis Arvatov and her work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory in Moscow: Christina Kiaer, 'The Constructivist Flapper Dress', *Imagine no Posessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 89–142; Zalambani, *L'art productiviste*, 57–8.

[7] Varvara Stepanova, *Kostyum segodnyashnego dnya*, 65. For similar comments juxtaposing production clothing with high fashion: Alexandra Ekster, 'Prostota i praktichnost' v odezhde', *Krasnaia Niva*, 21 (1923), 31.

[8] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 126.

[9] Arvatov, *Art and Production*, 18.

[10] Ibid., 21. For the origins of the critique of *kustarnichestvo*: Allan Wildman, 'Lenin's Battle with Kustarnichestvo: The Iskra Organization in Russia', *Slavic Review,* 23, 3 (1964), 479–503.

[11] Aligning production clothing with his broader agenda, Arvatov wrote in *Art and Production* that 'LEFists categorically reject all artisanal craft arts as technically reactionary' and 'style begins where personal arbitrariness ends', in Arvatov, *Art and Production*, 88, 41, 42.

[12] 'The meagerness not only of Russian feudalism, but also of all the old Russian history', Trotsky wrote, 'finds its most-depressing expression in the absence of real medieval cities as centres of commerce and craft. Handicraft did not succeed in Russia in separating itself from agriculture but preserved its character of home industry', in Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), trans. Max Eastman (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 336.

[13] Leon Trotsky, 'For the Internationalist Perspective', *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1972), 199; Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 1* (New York: Monad Press, 1972), 57.

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appropriating elements of bourgeois culture while slowly clearing the ground for its own eventual demise. When Trotsky discussed a cultural programme for the masses, he was primarily concerned with economic development, raising subsistence levels and achieving widespread literacy so that in his famous formulation, 'quantity will pass into quality'.[14] He allowed for the possibility that the 'laboratory methods' of Productivism might serve an important role in weaving the 'texture of culture' through the 'interactions of the intelligentsia of a class and the class itself', but, he was sceptical that the LEF circle would be capable of achieving these forms of solidarity. He dismissed their overtures toward party recognition by arguing that their class position and futurist orientation left them out-of-touch with the urgent material needs and organic cultural development of the proletariat.[15]

## The Third Italy: A Review

In Italy, the reception of Trotsky's Law of Uneven and Combined Development has traditionally been accompanied by a powerful, if terse, rejoinder: Antonio Gramsci's unfinished 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question,' written in October 1926 on the eve of his imprisonment by the fascist regime.[16] Already in 1919, under the sway of the Comintern and before his anti-Trotskyist shift in 1924, Gramsci argued that 'The historical conditions of Italy were not and are not very different from those in Russia'. Both Russia and Italy had a backward and oppressed peasantry, which could be potentially combined with a limited industrial base to become revolutionary protagonists.[17] Gramsci turned to the folk cultures of Sicily and Sardinia as a means of building alliances among the southern peasantry and the factory workers councils of the 'Northern Triangle' of Milan, Turin, and Genoa. Gramsci's cultural emphasis on folklore and counter-hegemony – within which he included the traditional handicrafts – attested to Italy's 'belated modernity', completely opposed to the aesthetics of Futurism and, ultimately, fascist rationalism: movements that instead posited a continuous, even progression towards a techno-scientific militarised utopia.[18]

By the 1960s and 1970s, while leftists and reformists pried loose the reception of Gramsci from Togliattian party orthodoxy, political economists began to construe the southern question as a problem of 'dualism'.[19] They attributed the country's fast-paced economic development to its combination of northward migrant labour and reciprocal southbound direct investment, which, along with the protectionist devaluation of the lira, managed to keep prices down and exports cheap. Capital-intensive and advanced technology firms thrived in the Northern Triangle while labour-intensive, low-profit enterprises were relegated to the Mezzogiorno. Scholars argued that dualism allowed the country to achieve high rates of industrial growth at the expense of peripheralising the southern labour market, thereby exacerbating the disequilibrium between the two regions.[20]

[14] Leon Trotsky, 'What Is Proletarian Culture, and Is It Possible?' (orig. 1923), *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 193.

[15] 'The Party cannot do that which is persistently recommended and canonise LEF, or even a definite wing of it, as "Communist Art". It is as impossible to canonise seekings as it is impossible to arm an army with an unrealised invention', in Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 139–40.

[16] For an overview of literature on the Gramsci-Trotsky axis: Frank Rosengarten, 'The Gramsci-Trotsky Question (1922–1932)', *Social Text*, 11 (1984–1985). For Gramsci's critique of permanent revolution: Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume 1*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 442.

[17] Antonio Gramsci, 'Operai e contadini' (1919), in Antonio Gramsci, *Selected Writings: 1916–1935*, ed., David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 113–8.

[18] Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 202. For a historical overview of the relationship between design, vernacular style, craft, Modernism and fascism in Italy: Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

[19] On the postwar Italian reception of Gramsci: Andrea Scapoio, 'Scattered Ashes: The Reception of the Gramscian Legacy in Postwar Italy', in Roberto M. Dainotto and Fredric Jameson, eds., *Gramsci in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[20] Vera Lutz, *Italy, A Study of Economic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Augusto Graziani, *Lo sviluppo di un'economia aperta* (Naples: ESI, 1969).

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As the economist Michael Piore wrote in the 1980s summing up this literature, amid economic uncertainty or flux, Italy's original dualism between capital and labour became a duality between that portion of the labour force that shared in some part the privileged position of capital and the other who continued to function as the residual factor of production.[21] But Piore, along with his colleague Charles Sabel, argued further that the later postwar period from the mid 1970s onwards marked a 'second industrial divide'. They showed how during this period the regional craft sector was expanding rapidly, forming a vital sub-supply network for mass production if it did not supplant Fordism altogether.

Scholars have tied this abrupt, if never entirely completed, transition to the emergence of Italy's small firms that composed its semi-cooperative, semi-competitive industrial districts. These districts flourished in response to the ratification of the Workers Statute (*Statuto dei Lavoratori*), labour reforms enacted in 1970. Spurred by the worker militancy of the 'Hot Autumn' (*Autunno Caldo)* in 1969, these reforms distinguished between the entitlements of workers in large and small firms, their right to assemble, the power of *delegati* (shop stewards or worker foremen) and subsidies for temporary employment. In retrospect, political economists and cultural geographers have widely viewed these laws as a catalysis for flexible specialisation: the restructuring and fragmentation of Italian industry that led to the dismantling of its vertically integrated multinationals and surprising success of its diffuse industrial districts as they pivoted to global markets.[22] By the mid 1970s, craftspeople who resented how worker foremen had destroyed traditional skill ladders and leveled wage hierarchies fled to the small 'runaway' shops of the districts which, because they employed fewer workers, managed to skirt labour regulations.[23]

By 1977, Arnaldo Bagnasco coined the term 'Third Italy' (*La Terza Italia*) to describe this tendency where Italy's deregulated peripheral economy of micro-enterprises, skilled artisans, flexible machinery, municipal welfare, and strong kinship and subcultural networks located predominantly within the central and northeastern section of the country and north of Milan outpaced the economy of large firms, rigid organisation, active unionisation, and heavy industry.[24] In design-focused and craft-based districts, small firms collaborated to produce new kinds of clothing, furniture and textiles, alongside related numerically controlled machine tools that could change the form and speed of the final output of these semi-artisanal, semi-industrial goods, allowing for the brief dominance of Third Italy firms in the global marketplace (Figure 1). By the 1980s, their success had prompted a temporary wave of optimistic scholarship on the hidden potential of small-scale regional economies to engage in what Marino Regini has called *La sfida della flessibilità*: a wide-ranging, multimodal search for flexibility, where workers, small firms, and local governments in the industrial districts of the Global North, from the outskirts of Osaka to the foothills of Silicon Valley, came to organise labour and social services, manage personnel, use technology, and orient to increasingly volatile markets in less rigid ways.[25]

[21] Michael Piore, 'Dualism in the Labour Market: A Response to Uncertainty and Flux. The Case of France', *Revue Économique* 29, 1 (1978), 28.

[22] Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel. *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 151–6.

[23] Ibid., 156.

[24] Calculating data from ISTAT (The Italian National Institute of Statistics) and *Annuario statistico italiano* from 1974 and 1984, Raffaella Nannetti has provided a quantitative analysis of the rapid shift from large to small and medium size firms from 1971 until 1981 in the northeast and central regions of the country. Looking at the number of enterprises versus the number of inhabitants, she notes that the rate of diffusion of enterprise in industry and services in the northeast increased at a rate of 31.8 per cent and 50.8 per cent respectively during the ten-year period. See Table 2.6 and 2.8 in Raffaela Nannetti, *Growth and Territorial Policies: The Italian Model of Social Capitalism* (London: Pinter, 1988). For statistical analysis of the importance of the industrial districts to the Italian economy during the same period: Fabio Sforzi, 'The Quantitative Importance of Industrial Districts', in Frank Pyke, Giacomo Becattini and Werner Sengenberger, eds., *Industrial Districts and Interfirm Cooperation in Italy* (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1990).

[25] Marino Regini, ed., *La sfida della flessibilità* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1988). For an intensive debate on the empirical accuracy, merits, and utility of the concept of flexible specialisation: Ash Amin and Kevin Robins, 'Industrial Districts and Regional Development: Limits and Possibilities', along with subsequent responses from Charles Sabel, Michael

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**Figure 1.** Early numerically controlled inspection and packing machines for textiles at the Testa factory in the Zanica industrial district north of Milan, 1969. Courtesy: Testa Group Archive.

As the economic sociologist and centre-left politician Carlo Trigilia wrote, 'The advantages that small firms accrue may be synthesised by the word elasticity (*elasticità*), a term that signifies many things in this case: the ability to rapidly shift models, to be free from rigid technology, to be able to count on a minimally bureaucratised system, easy internal communication, and ready finance'.[26] In Italy, industrial districts employed these varied senses of 'flexible' and 'elastic', developing an enormous excess capacity to produce standardised goods; and by the 1970s, they managed to resolve this surplus by swimming up-market, offloading luxury exports to international markets, leading to the 'Made in Italy' effect where high quality items were produced within zones designated for historic craft traditions, often in collaboration with the emergent figure of the 'designer'.[27]

The most self-reflexive group of designers working in high-end production were the prolific and tight-knit 'Radicals' – Nanni Strada, Clino Trini Castelli, Enzo Mari, Ettore Sottsass, Andrea Branzi, among scores of others – who taught at polytechnical universities, wrote for internationally

Piore, and Michael Storper in Pyke et al., *Industrial Districts and Interfirm Cooperation in Italy*. For a recent attempt to revive and revise the model: Stefano Micelli, *Futuro artigiano. L'innovazione nelle mani degli italiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011).

[26] Arnaldo Bagnasco e Carlo Trigilia ed., *Società e politica nelle aree di piccola impresa. Il caso della Valdelsa* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1985), 14–15.

[27] For a broader discussion of the 'Made in Italy' phenomenon from art and design history perspectives: Catharine Rossi, *Crafting Design in Italy: from Post-war to Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); vis-à-vis Dressing Design and high fashion: Paola Colaiacomo, ed., *Fatto in Italia: la cultura del made in Italy (1960–2000)* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006); and via regional economic analysis: Michael Storper, *The Regional World* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 19–20.

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oriented publications, consulted for domestic and multinational firms, and catered both to a thriving counterculture who avidly read their manifestos and a local and international bourgeoisie who purchased their products. Using their cultural capital to mediate between the artisanal, industrial and service sectors, they were as much marginal members of a new, productivist technical intelligentsia who developed novel tools and products as the most recent iteration of the traditional *impannatore*: the figure who purchased raw materials, organised networks of small-scale shops, brought products to market, and innovated based on demand, thereby shaping the fashions of the moment.[28] Whether pertaining to the management of workflows, consumer preference, skill, modularity or synthetic materials, flexibility served as the governing mantra of their designs.

Nevertheless, insofar as flexible specialisation took hold in the Third Italy as a set of informal labour relations operating outside both the traditional handicrafts and the proletarian culture of the factory, its ideological implications went unnoticed by the post-Gramscian left. Reformist readings of counter-hegemony and operaist 'worker subjectivity' only haltingly and partially recognised the ad-hoc aesthetics and municipal values the new districts embodied, preferring to focus on the individual and collective as their units of analysis and worker centrality and party representation as their major points of reckoning.[29] By contrast, the designers' day-to-day operations required them to adopt and adapt to the new flexible labour conditions as they collaborated with small industrial firms in the Third Italy.[30] Designers including Gio Ponti and Ettore Sottsass had drawn on Italy's upmarket craft workshops since the mid-century, but it was at the onset of the 1970s that the Radical designers made production the very focus of their work and writing. A central contradiction emerged in their work therefore: namely, the disjunction between their stated radical political commitments to either the counterculture or the workers' movement and their practical reorganisation of artisanal work through the integration of prototype construction, contracting, organising and fabrication. Their attempts to reconcile these divergent orientations to labour loosely recalls PCI parliamentary deputy Giorgio Amendola's centre-left accommodations at the time, which tried to build alliances between the traditional working class and the productive petty-bourgeoisie by encouraging and modernising the artisan sector and fostering the growth of small and medium-scale production.[31]

Their dual role raises the dilemma of Radical design's niche within the general ecology of artisanal labour. Radical designers constituted a group of collaborative and competitive figures, firms and even extended families that engaged in the very practices that came to define flexible specialisation. They, too, resorted to non-competitive hiring, commissions and batch production in an effort to gain a foothold in national and global markets. Their collective efforts at fabricating goods, entering competitions, trade fairs and drumming up publicity might constitute an extremely reflexive sort of district-level production that was always already practised by workers of lower status around them. The isomorphisms between their own practices and those workers who constituted the Third Italy seem to go beyond mere analogy. Radical designers relied on small scale artisans in industrial districts to fabricate their works. Their activities therefore constituted one node within more complex networks

[28] Giacomo Beccatini, 'The Marshallian Industrial District as a Socio-Economic Notion', in Frank Pyke, Giacomo Becattini and Werner Sengenberger, eds., *Industrial Districts and Interfirm Cooperation in Italy* (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1990), 42–3.

[29] See Tronti's reading of Gramsci's notion of 'socialità del sapere' (social knowledge) in Mario Tronti, *Alcune questioni intorno al marxismo di Gramsci, Studi gramsciani. Atti del convegno tenuto a Roma, nei giorni 11–13 gennaio 1958.* Roma: (Editori Riuniti – Istituto Gramsci, 1958); Norberto Bobbio, 'Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society' (1967), republished in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1979).

[30] On Radical design's adoption of Operaismo and Autonomia: Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Sarah Catenacci and Jacopo Galimberti, 'Deschooling, Manual Labour, and Emancipation: The Architecture and Design of Global Tools, 1973–1975', in M. A. Brown and M. Millar Fisher, eds., *Collaboration and Its (Dis)Contents: Art, Architecture, and Photography Since 1950* (London: Courtauld Books, 2017); Maurizio Lazzarato, 'The Conditions of a Radical Project: Refusal of Work as a Refusal of Culture', in Silvia Franceschini and Valerio Borgonuovo, eds., *Global Tools 1973–1975* (Istanbul: SALT, 2015).

[31] Giorgio Amendola. 'Conclusioni', in *La piccola e media industria nella crisi dell'economia italiana* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974).

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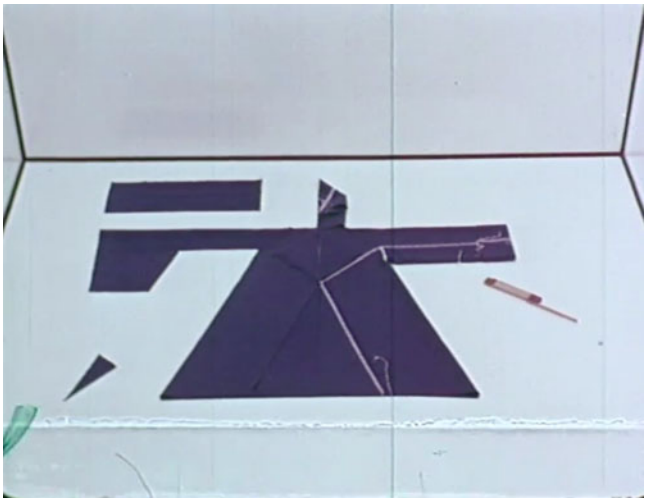


**Figure 2.** Assembly of 'The Cloak', *Il Manto e la Pelle*, 16 mm film, 25 minutes, 1973. Design Nanni Strada. Design Coordination Clino T. Castelli. Presented at the Fifteenth Milan Triennial. Text: Tomasso Trini. Director: Davide Mosconi. © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada.

of production elaborated across scales, classes and divisions of labour. And in contrast to their historical avantgarde productivist predecessors, the neo-avantgarde Radical designers focused on the interdependence between 'advanced' and 'backward' techniques, small and large firms and different phases of production. They began to see the artisan as less of a primitive, vernacular or residual antidote to mature capitalism than central to Italy's own economic development.

## Dressing Design: Flexibility between Production and Consumption

The gradual recognition of the importance of flexible specialisation may be traced through the writings and projects of Radical designers over the course of the 1970s. These designers worked in many traditional and emerging artisanal domains from ceramics and furniture to laminates and electronics. Although they achieved world renown through their product and furniture design, some of their most compelling, if lesser-known, projects posited industrial design solutions to textile and clothing manufacture under the heading 'Dressing Design', a tendency that reached its apex in the wake of the fifteenth Milan Triennial in 1973.

In that year, the Milanese designer Nanni Strada produced a piece of clothing that could fit nearly anyone. She called it The Cloak and the Skin (*Il Manto e la Pelle)* .The 'cloak' (Figure 2) folded into geometric shapes over a 'skin' (Figure 3) that sheathed the body in knitted elastic from neck to ankle. The casual cotton-nylon garment collapsed in the pocket for easy storage only to expand four times its length when worn (Figure 4).[32] Its seamless fit, portability, and sheen led to its popularity with a niche clientele in Milan, Paris, and London, yet those benefits to the consumer paled in comparison to the industrial developments that made it possible to produce the clothing in mere minutes.[33]

Working with the sewing machine company Società Rimoldi, Strada invented a new technique for manufacturing polytubular cylindrical elastic sheathes (Figure 5). Having retooled a circular hosiery machine, she was able to make an H-shaped tube in which the crotch of what would otherwise be tights corresponded to the cut in the neckline. In *Il Manto e la Pelle*, the tubular knitting machine replaced the loom. Fabric welding (*saldatura*) (Figure 6) replaced stitching. Fasteners replaced buttons.

[32] M. Sisto, 'Proposte per gli abiti del future. Il Dress Design di Nanni Strada', *Vogue Italia*, 268 (1974), 88.

[33] 'The commercial payoff was not long in coming in Italy. Nanni Strada sold 3000 "structures" in just a few months. The sales in French department stores are also significant. The stock ran out in only a few days', *CREE Sommaire* (July 1976), 19; The designer Christina Morozzi provides the most comprehensive discussion of the project in her slightly later article, 'Nanni Strada: Geometria nell'abbigliamento', *Gap Italia* (October 1977), 78–9.

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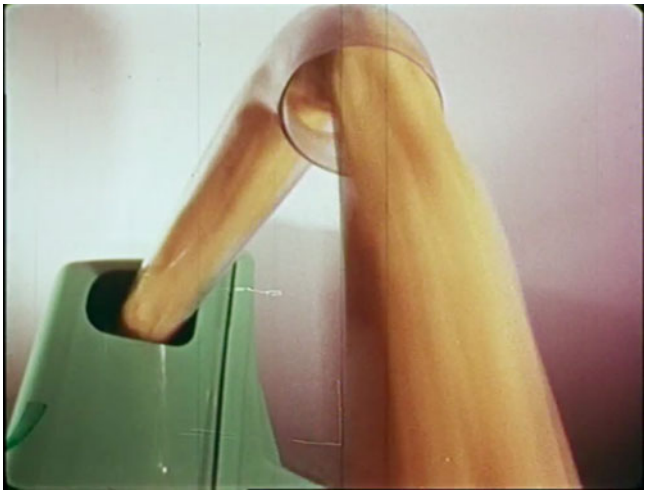


**Figure 3.** Yellow cotton-nylon fabric shooting out of a Calza Bloch pneumatic tube. *Il Manto e la Pelle* (film). © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada.



**Figure 4.** A model slowly pulls out the 'Skin' from a small cardboard storage package, revealing its length. *Il Manto e la Pelle* (film). © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada.

The skin was executed in a single automated process, eliminating all assembling and finishing operations associated with tailoring. Collaborating with the filmmaker Davide Mosconi, the designer Clino Trini Castelli, and the critic Tomasso Trini, and working under the sponsorship of the synthetic fabrics firm Bossi (Cameri) and the large-scale hosiery Calze Bloch (Milan), she promoted the production method through an eponymous film for the Milan Triennial, where she ultimately won the prestigious Compasso D'Oro prize in 1979 and eventually patented H-shaped tubular fabrication under the name 'The Strada Method'.

The significance of *Il Manto e la Pelle* lies not merely in the elasticity of the garment or the tractability it offered the wearer, but also in the flexible means of production that prompted its fabrication. As Trini wrote in an early review of Strada's work, 'The real garment can only be defined by the acts that have determined its production'.[34] 'Sold in flat paper packets rather like industrial clothes', her projects eliminated the artisanal phases of manufacture: taking final orders from wholesalers or retailers; working with limited production facilities; offloading the assembly and finishing operations to

[34] Tomasso Trini, 'Abitare l'abito', *Domus*, 510 (May 1972), 37.

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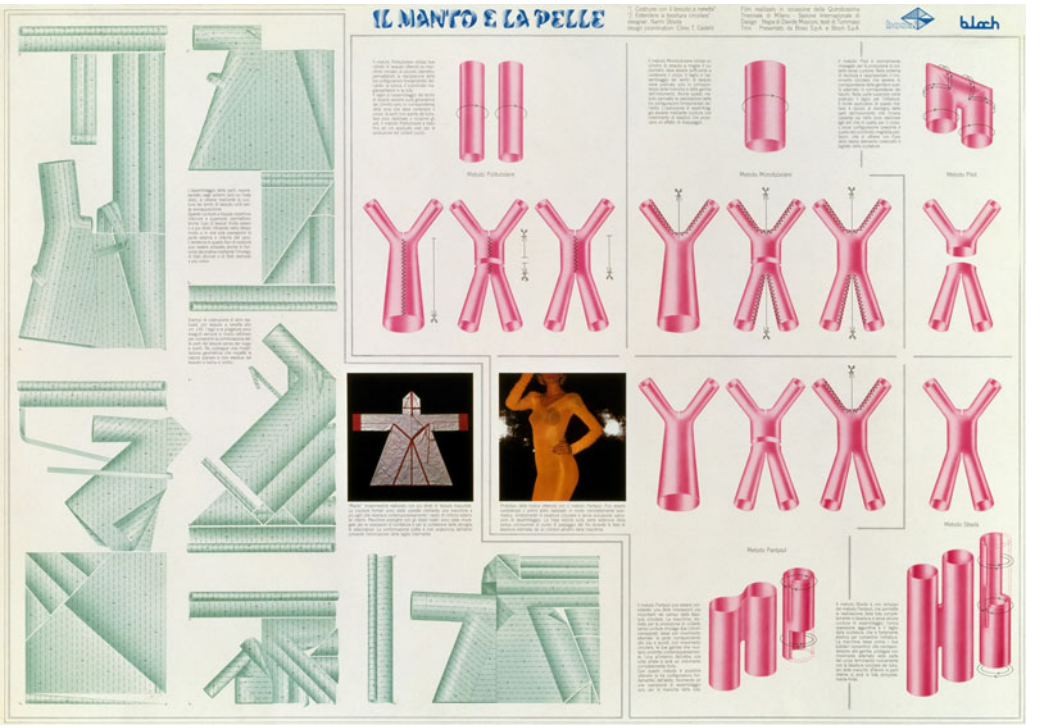



**Figure 5.** Synoptic table of *Il Manto e la Pelle* (film). On the right, the diagram shows the development of polytubular clothing fabrication, outlining Nanni Strada's modification of the 'Pantysol Method' to produce the 'Strada Method'. © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada.

knitwear subcontractors who cut, sew, line, press, inspect, and mend.[35] Moreover, her clothing eschewed 'anthropometry' (human measurement) and could be adjusted through a system of ties and pleats, thereby partially 'unhooking' (*sganciamento*) the form of the clothing from the body.[36] She therefore abandoned the stylist's and tailor's orientation to the human figure. Rather than subsume the body under a fixed size or reify it as an armature for adornment, she considered how it adapted to the pliability of the skin and the folds of the cloak.[37]

From an art historical perspective, Strada discovered a productivist lineage within the Italian and Soviet historical avantgardes. Her synthetic 'skin' nodded to the futurist cult of viscose materials and Ernesto Thayaht's single-piece clothing; her small modification of the Rimoldi equipment recalls attempts by applied productivists to take up machine tool engineering on the factory floor. Her substitution of the tailor's measurements and hand-sewn stitch work for highly visible industrially produced seams drew explicitly on the constructivist workers' outfits of Liubov Popova, Vera Mukhina and Nadezhda Lamanova as they worked under the theoretical imperatives of Stepanova's *prozodezhda*.[38]

Beyond their references to earlier avantgardes, Strada's investigations helped spur Andrea Branzi, Dario Bartolini, and Lucia Morozzi (Bartolini), and other members of the Florentine-based architecture collective Archizoom Associati, to embark on an extensive investigation of mass production in the

[35] Camilla Cederna, 'Il lato debole: a cura di Camilla', *L'Espresso*, 14 (4 Apr. 1976), 90; Francesca Grazzini, 'Moda: L'oriente in scatola', *Vita Moderna*, 40 (Nanni Strada Archive, Milan).

[36] Nanni Strada and Clino Trini Castelli, 'Il manto e la pelle', *Casabella*, 387 (1974), 38–42.

[37] Author interview with Nanni Strada and Clino Trini Castelli, Milan, 15 Oct. 2019.

[38] Jeffrey Schnapp, 'The Fabric of Modern Times', *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 1 (Autumn, 1997), 191–245; Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 167–71. For Strada's own comments on the costume designs of Stepanova, Lamanova, and Mukhina: Nanni Strada, 'Io le Russe le vesto così', *Panorama Mese*, 14 (1983), 62.

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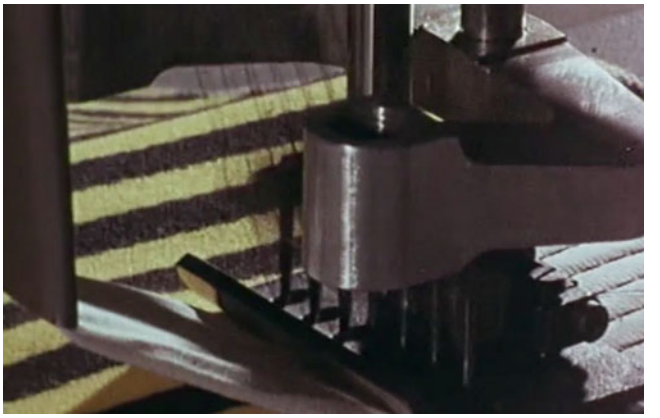


**Figure 6.** Detail of Rimoldi sewing machine creating welded seams. *Il Manto e la Pelle* (film). © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada.

garment industry. Archizoom produced the cartoon *Dressing is Easy,* explaining how elementary stitching, cutting, and folding in rectilinear patterns could produce clothes by simple combination and assembly without recourse to traditional tailoring techniques and large-scale manufacture (Figure 7). Here, they displaced Third Italy firm and worker flexibility onto the figure of the consumer, who could create and alter their garments on an ad-hoc basis using their kits comprised of needles, thread, scissors, and textile swatches with little expertise required (Figure 8).[39] In 1973, Archizoom released a line of clothing at the show Beachwear Capri (*Mare Moda Capri),* where an elastic body sheath underlay a loose overall where they made explicit their intent to engage flexibly specialised methods of production. Branzi wrote:

> We saw fashion as a creative field, but at the same time as a theoretical model for a new kind of production, given the name post-industrial by theoreticians in that the all-embracing logic of mass production, which represses changes in taste as an unpredictable and irrational variable, was giving way to a search for flexibility. It was no longer society that must resemble the factory, in every way, but the factory that had to adapt to society.[40]

Drawing on the emerging autonomist discourse of 'the social factory', Branzi discussed flexible specialisation as an opportunity for the wearer: 'each consumer tended to reinvent the product through an original mechanism of combination and assembly'.[41] Both the rapid turnover in new styles and the modification of similar kinds of clothing by proliferating subcultures meant dress design was fertile terrain for bringing the contradictions of mass production into the open. Here the group channelled Productivism's engagement with socialist *byt* and productive consumption into post-1960s critiques of 'everyday life' and 'do-it-yourself' (*fai da te*).[42]

[39] Author interview with Dario Bartolini, Impruneta, 12 Oct. 2019.

[40] Andrea Branzi, *The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design*, trans. C.H. Evans (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 87.

[41] Archizoom Associati, 'Dressing Design. Note preliminari per un disegno dei sistemi dell'abbigliamento', *Casabella*, 373 (1973), 17. 'For Archizoom, dressing could enter into the conception of the designer, who, in contrast to the stylist working in industry, must think about the flexible product whose use would be specialised and indeterminate at the same time', in Elena Fava, *Vestire contro: il dressing design di Archizoom* (Milan: Mondadori, 2018), 32. This tendency reached its apotheosis by 1979 when Elio Fiorucci established Dxing, a research centre explicitly devoted to the way youth culture takes up the problem of dress and clothing.

[42] In the introduction to the Italian translation of Arvatov's *Art and Production*, Hans Günther and Karla Hielscher align the Soviet productivist orientation to use value and 'life building' with everyday life, while contrasting these activities with the 'design and styling typical of late Capitalism', whose hopes to enact a revolution are mere 'fantasy'. 'Introduzione', Hans Günther and Karla Hielscher (trans. Mario Caciagli) in Arvatov, *Arte, produzione, e rivoluzione proletaria*, 21; Branzi, Mari and others in the Radical design milieu were highly critical of DIY tendencies toward dilettantism and arbitrariness. Early polemics include Gillo Dorfles, 'I Pericoli del do-it-yourself', *Progettare Inpiù: Per un comportamento creativo nei*

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**Figure 7.** Archizoom Associati (Lucia Morozzi) apron. Raw cotton, natural white. Colour segmented stitching. Dressing Design prototype, circa 1973. Courtesy: Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive.




**Figure 8.** Archizoom Associati, *Dressing is Easy* domestic assembly kit, 1973. Courtesy: Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive.

At the Fifteenth Triennale, while Strada exhibited *Il Manto e la Pelle*, Archizoom presented the film *How Gogol's Overcoat is Made* (1973). Adapting Nikolai Gogol's famous short story, *The Overcoat* (1842), about a poor clerk's misadventures in acquiring and losing a beautiful cloak, their film satirised its sponsor, Facis, the historic clothing brand of the Turin-based Gruppo GFT, the world's largest manufacturer of name-brand luxury clothing. Archizoom explored how Italy's giant clothing firms had difficulty keeping up with fashion cycles due to their economies of scale and fixed output.[43] Referring to district level production, they argued that the 'flexible and pliable quality of the fashion industry' revealed how the market continually adapted to new methods of production. In large

*processi di rappresentazione dell'ambiente. Documenti e ricerche*, 2, 8 (1975), 36–7; Enzo Mari, *Autoprogettazione?*, 2nd edn (Mantua: Corraini, 2002), 33.

[43] 'The flexibility of the small firms results in success because of the capacity to deal with extremely dynamic markets that are increasingly fragmented. Large industrial operations like Ruggeri are penalised because they cannot work under just-in-time production constraints', in Elena Fava, *Vestire Contro*, 17. 'Because of shifting consumer tastes and unpredictable climactic changes that result in a vast number of changing styles, knitwear production is marked by short production runs that preclude large economies of scale', in Mark Lazerson, 'Subcontracting in the Modena Knitwear Industry', *Industrial Districts*, 112.

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clothing factories, by contrast, the huge machines 'behaved like a giant tailor's shop, reproducing hand-crafted products on an industrial scale'.[44] Archizoom's diagnosis of fashion cycles and their attempt to integrate moments of conception and execution – 'to identify a flexible system of models that through a certain number of operations can give rise to an almost infinite combination of products' – spoke to how small firms could innovate and maintain a sense of autonomy by specialising in non-standard goods, relying on traditional multi-purpose technologies and craft skills while adapting to shifting consumer taste preferences and short runs that prevented economies of scale.[45]

Dressing Design marked a research-driven phase for Radical designers that had taken shape in the early 1970s and continued throughout the decade. They drew comparisons to their own experiments and industry-wide trends in fabrication raising the productivist dilemma regarding how much their small efforts could change the quality of contemporary labour practices on a large scale. The critic Manfredo Tafuri described their interventions as increasingly limited by processes of automation:

> Up to the time when the industries producing durable goods began to use techniques of fabrication that demanded highly complex machinery and highly skilled operators, the processes of production with a low level of capitalisation and of productivity always offered the designer some scope for arbitrarily transforming the product 'qualitatively'. But recent technological developments, the necessity for international consolidation of capital, and the ever-increasing concentration of capital in those highly developed industries that have faced the problem of planned modernisation, tend to limit that 'arbitrary scope'. Today, the planning of production cycles is being entrusted to managerial systems controlled by computer programming.[46]

Despite Tafuri's grim diagnosis, practising designers presented a more complicated picture of how automation changed their lived experiences and working conditions in the districts. From 1976 until 1979, the Marxist designer Enzo Mari conducted an extensive investigation of Italian handicrafts as part of his presidency of the Association for Industrial Design (*Associazione per il Disegno Industriale*) (ADI). His research culminated in the exhibition 'Where the Artisan is' (*Dov'è L'artigiano)*, which took place in Florence in 1981 and was restaged at the 1981–2 Milan Triennial, where he presented the shifting terrain of artisanal production in Italy as it moved between local artisans, domestic piecework, speculative design, and machine tools. In the exhibition catalogue, Mari cited the 'expressive research' of *Il Manto e la Pelle*, a category which would also include the work done by Dario Bartolini, Branzi and Castelli at Centro Design Montefibre, a research centre that explored new textile types and applications during the mid-1970s.[47] (Figure 9) He contrasted their experimental inquiries into machine tools and materials with a more prolific hybridisation of artisanal and industrial work in the Third Italy. At the famous Varese-based clothing label, Missoni, designers provided prototypes, which were then fed through industrial looms. Residualised artisans were left to serve as mere inspectors within sectors of the apparel industry that were rapidly automating.[48] Mari disdained how artisanal production competed with and complemented industrial methods by dumbing down the quality of work, resorting to assembly line processes and suppressing wages, thereby relegating workers to 'conditions of underdevelopment'.[49] As he noted, deskilling within the industrial

[44] Archizoom, *Dressing Design. Note preliminari*, 18; see also Clino Trini Castelli, 'Il sistema delle taglie e dei difetti', *Casabella*, 410 (1976), 8.

[45] Andrea Branzi, *La sezione internazionale di Design*, typescript document, 1973. Lucia and Dario Bartolini Archive, Impruneta.

[46] Manfredo Tafuri, 'Design and Technological Utopia', in Emilio Ambasz, ed., *Italy, the New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* (New York: MoMA and New York Graphic Society, 1972), 395–9.

[47] Ampelio Bucci, Dario Bartolini and Laura Bonin, *L'altro modo di fare l'abito: Elementi strutturali di taglio nell abbigliamento non occidentale*. Quaderno 1 (Milan: Centro Design Montefibre, 1975).

[48] Enzo Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano* (Firenze: Electa, 1981), 19–22.

[49] 'If the production of artisan objects takes place at a cost equal or inferior to the cost of industrial production, this is possible in only two ways: first, we have industrial production masquerading as artisan production, even though the product

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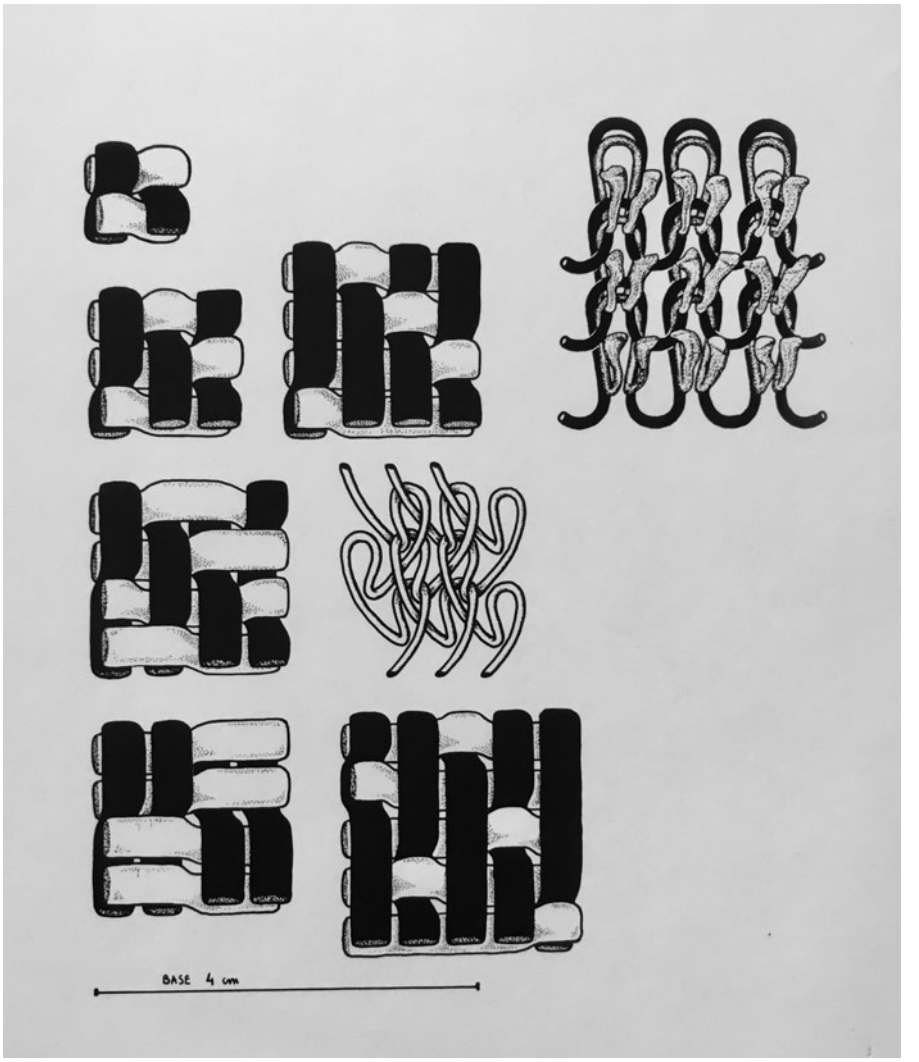



**Figure 9.** Dario Bartolini, diagram presenting textile assembly methods for a line of outerwear. Centro Design Montefibre, 1975. Courtesy: Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive.

districts complemented their new orientation to cheap labour and untapped consumer markets abroad, particularly in Eastern Europe.

## Flexible Specialisation for Export

By the early 1980s, during the period of the Second Cold War, in the wake of the dissolution of the historic compromise in Italy, the rise of Eurocommunism, and the PCI's definitive break with the Soviet Union in 1981, the artisanal districts of the Third Italy tried to expand their exports to the Eastern Bloc. By 1983, Italian Socialist prime minister Bettino Craxi had begun to make

is manufactured with traditional tools and materials (for, what is more to the point, the work is broken down and divided like industrial work); second, we have an effectively artisan production, but in conditions of underdevelopment. The economic loss given by the high incidence of planning cost over execution cost is offset by wage-levels and general working conditions inferior to those allowed for in industry', in Enzo Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano* (Florence: Electa, 1981), 12–13.

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diplomatic overtures to the Andropov regime, which was busy increasing the production of essential goods as part of its eleventh five-year plan by opening its borders to foreign trade and investment. As a result, Italian textile, apparel, and machine tool industries gained a foothold in the Soviet Bloc countries, along with their primary competitors in Germany and Japan.[50] Soviet leaders placed a special importance on these contacts with Italy, which remained one of the few European Union nations willing to conduct business with the Soviet Union in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

The Soviet press reported that the Italy-Russia relationship had come to acquire new economic, scientific, and cultural ties, which were driven by the Milanese business community in particular.[51] When Emilio Rocchi, the general secretary of the Italian-Soviet chamber of commerce in Milan, was asked by a Russian reporter about Italian-Soviet trade, Rocchi responded: 'We plan to hold a conference of representatives of business circles in Italy in order to discuss the possibility of the participation of small and medium-sized Italian enterprises in the implementation of projects of the eleventh five-year plan of the USSR'. These partnerships proved to be an important development for both sides. They opened up new avenues for Third Italy exports, which in turn raised prospects for marginalised Soviet small firms and their in-house boutiques (*firmennye magaziny*) to assert themselves in the face of mass production and centralised planning.[52]

Within this geopolitical context, Strada resumed her collaboration with Rimoldi in order to create clothing exclusively for the Soviet Union. Their venture reveals the complex set of calibrations they made as they imagined what kind of garments would both suit the Russian market and accommodate Rimoldi's need to display its equipment capacity. Conversely, the episode offers a sense of how these overtures were received by the Russian press, showing how Uneven and Combined Development was not merely a shifting of industrial processes to less-developed nations, but also, as Alexey Golubev puts it, a 'transnational entanglement' where those processes and their aesthetic and material and class connotations would be continually reframed and reevaluated.[53]

In May 1982, Strada and the directors and technicians at Rimoldi conducted an initial meeting with a representative from the ministry of light industry, which led to the exhibition of Strada's Summer '84 Collection (Figure 10), a ten-piece clothing line, at a symposium conducted in Moscow. The symposium followed on the heels of Inlegmash-82 (International Exhibition for Equipment for the Textile and Garment Industry), a massive quadrennial exhibition of equipment and technological processes, which, like Archizoom and Strada's Dressing Design at the Triennial, was meant to reveal to a general public the underlying processes that undergird the apparel industry.[54]

The techniques and equipment on display ranged from new dyeing machines and shuttleless looms to laser beams that cut shapes for the soles of shoes. As a reporter from *Izvestia* noted, 'Firms from different countries have accumulated considerable experience in this area and this survey will open up new opportunities in the international division of labour in the mechanical engineering sector

[50] Rodolfo Brancoli, 'Produzione, Servizi, Vestiti, L'Urss riscopre la "qualità": Andropov rivedi il sistema degli incentivi', *La Repubblica* (25 Nov. 1983), 12; John Foot, *Milan since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). For reporting on the Eleventh Five Year Plan's implications for light industry from the Soviet perspective: '13 iyuniya – Den' rabotnikov legkoy promyshlennosti. Tovary dlya vseh', *Izvestiia* (12 June 1982), 1.

[51] R. Paklin, 'SSSR – Italiya. Faktor Stabil'nosti', *Izvestiia* (11 Mar. 1981), 5.

[52] Jukka Gronow and Sergey Zhuravlev, *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finish Literature Society, 2015), 215–18.

[53] 'Transnational entanglements across the Iron Curtain demonstrate that different social groups had their own understandings and practices of what it meant to be modern. Objects encapsulated and communicated across national borders these different, class-based visions and practices', in Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 166.

[54] 'How to sew a fashionable suit, make comfortable, nice shoes or, say, an elegant handbag? These questions are not confined to fashion designers and designers. Behind what we call "finished products" are sometimes the most complex production processes – from primary processing of raw materials to the intricacies of production technology, control, packaging, and storage', in V. Shmyganovsky, 'Reportazh s vystavki. Eta slozhnaya legkaya, promyshlennost', *Izvestiia* (20 May 1982), 6.

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**Figure 10.** Details of a frock from Rimoldi by Nanni Strada, Summer 1984 Collection. Designed for production at the MPO-VVT factory in Moscow. Milan Triennal. © Nanni Strada. Courtesy: Nanni Strada Archive.

for light industry'.[55] The exhibition did not merely exhibit the latest fashions therefore, but the machines at work, presenting how 'simple, elegant clothing' could be knitted quickly and inexpensively with Soviet materials: 'At Rimoldi, we knew the Soviets wanted to renovate their machines . . . at this symposium, we could cut through the red tape and just show them what the equipment does', Strada recalled.[56] The pieces of Strada's line were meant to be combined in different ways to produce a set of standard outfits. 'After we made the prototypes for the collection, we wrote out the directions for how to produce them alongside photographs of the clothing as it is meant to be worn, and a video-manual'.[57] During the symposium, official evaluators tried to tear the garments apart, and if they withstood this trial they put them on. Strada's clothing proved durable enough. Rimoldi installed its

[55] Shmyganovsky, *Reportazh s vystavki*, 6.
[56] Strada quoted in Maria Novella Oppo, 'Firmato Strada arriva in URSS il tailleur "made in Italy"', *Unitá* (15 Feb. 1984), np, Strada Archive, Milan.
[57] Oppo, *Firmato Strada*, np.

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equipment at the MPO-VVT factory in Moscow and received a commission to make thirty thousand garments, which were sold at department stores in central Moscow with the promise of millions of more orders should the clothing prove popular.[58]

Articles in the Soviet press offer a sense of how these exchanges played out on a transnational level as Nikolai Tarasov, the head theorist and minister of light industry from 1965 until 1985, announced provisions for high-quality clothing and textiles to an eager Russian public.[59] The Soviet press explicitly framed the technology and expertise as an international 'division of labour' dependent on 'cooperation between the Soviet Union and Western firms'.[60] As the Soviet markets opened to certain nations in the West, Italian firms sold their machinery, provided their production knowledge, and leased their labels to manufacturers in the Soviet Union and their satellite states.[61] Nevertheless, Tarasov continued to emphasise 'planned discipline, introducing brigade forms of labour organisation, and developing socialist competition under the slogan "No one lagging behind"'.[62] Collaborations between flexibly specialised Western textile and apparel firms and the highly centralised Soviet state bureaucracy yielded logistical nightmares that became fodder for Russian comedians, who had a field day imagining the infelicitous communication among foreign producers, light-industry bureaucrats, and department store managers as they raced to meet state quotas and popular demand.

The widely read satirical magazine *Krokodil* devoted the entire January 1982 issue to the missteps of the eleventh five-year plan and its transnational ambitions. On the cover, one wolf in a parka turns to another, saying 'You think it was easy for me to get this sheepskin coat? Someone had to gnaw a lot of throats to make this thing!' (Figure 11). The joke sends up both fashionable Soviet consumers (*stiliagi*), who place a high value on foreign luxury goods and the traditional means by which coats continue to be made in Russia. Inside the issue there is a shaggy dog story about the accidental theft of domestic shoes that leads an investigator in search of the culprit through the stages of clothing manufacturing, subcontracted further and further into the Russian hinterlands. Chemical suppliers are not able to provide enough polyurethane for soles, the leather is poorly treated, and the paint is crumbling off of the fabric, to the embarrassment of plant managers tasked with rapidly producing millions of shoes. These conditions are only partially resolved, however, with the arrival of imported lines from Italy:

> A Bourgeois Italian trying on 'Paris Commune' style boots sighed: 'I have enough boots at home, but I'll still buy these! What a chic label!' And again the investigator was ready to light up with quiet joy and bow to the machine builders who had produced such wonderful fashion lines at the Moscow factory, but it turned out that those lines were actually purchased in Italy, and local industry has supplied the Russian shoemakers with such poor materials that there is nothing to scold them for. Even the boxes for packing the boots coming off the assembly line were brought from Italy. Only a few come in the domestic 'G' brand boxes, which crumple and fall apart as soon as they are loaded, which is why the shoes acquire a 'soft boiled' (*vsmyatku*) look to them, which would be unheard of in Italy where packaging is made from coated cardboard with special pads for crease-resistant™ shoes.[63]

[58] Brancoli, *Produzione*, 12.

[59] 'Legkaya Promyshlennost', *Izvestiia*, 5 (6 Jan. 1981), 2.

[60] 'Zakonodateli mody i krasoty', *Izvestiia*, 150 (29 May 1984), 5.

[61] To provide some examples, while Rimoldi and Strada licensed their machines and intellectual property, Bossi, who sponsored *Il Manto e la Pelle*, entered into lucrative deals with the Soviet Union via Contex, a Havana-based trade fair run by the Cuban textile import-export association; factories in Kaliningrad began to 'master the production' of cheaply produced marked-down jeans under the Italian 'Jesus' trademark, whose firm provided them with 'technical documentation, designs, and models'; after doing reconnaissance work in Western sewing firms, the new luxury Bulgarian label, Vitosha, launched in the Soviet Bloc. V. Lukashin, 'Opyt NRB. Reputaciya objazyvaet', *Izvestiia* (11 May 1981) 5; V. Tolstov, 'Novye tovary. Eti ydobnye dzhinsy', *Izvestiia* (19 Feb. 1983), 6.

[62] Nikolai Tarasov, *Light Industry* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Pub. House, 1972).

[63] Stanislav Pestov, 'Sapogi vsmyatku ili brak po-ital'yanski', *Krokodil*, 3 (1982), 4–5.

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**Figure 11.** E. Shabelnika, cover of the satirical magazine *Krokodil*, 1982.

Here, the *Krokodil* writers ironise the complex Italian-Soviet trade-agreements through an encounter between representative individuals at a Soviet factory-brand store. The bourgeois radical 'Italyanka' dressed for the 'Paris commune' shops for elegant socialist clothing only to find out, along with the investigator, that the shoes through which she styles her political commitments actually originate in Italian firms who have sold their expertise, intellectual property, finished commodities, and even

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**Figure 12.** V. Panfilova, untitled illustration for *Krokodil*, 1982.

packaging to Soviet manufacturers. The story was accompanied by an illustration of accidental footwear made from the errors of domestic suppliers: stilettos with no soles, Oxfords joined at the heel, boots whose laces are tied up past the tongue, leaving no room for feet to enter, and tennis shoes of an absurd length (Figure 12). The story and illustration raised concerns about 'debased adaptation', the anachronistic class-imaginaries of Western European leftists, the Russian public's commodity fetishism as it opened its borders, all while deflating the minister of light industry's speculative pronouncements, whose promises of providing high-quality goods became a crisis of production and consumption where Soviet workers are left deskilled and the goods themselves ruined: 'crease-resistant™' ends up 'soft boiled'.[64]

*Krokodil*'s parody falls into a late socialist genre the anthropologist Serguei Oushakine has dubbed 'economic horror', where attempts to coordinate 'the production, accumulation, and redistribution of objects' lead to hoarding and wastefulness; the mismanagement of clothing served as a key setting for the genre.[65] Rather than see the late-Soviet administration of everyday commodities as merely unprofitable, however, Oushakine understands it as a sacralisation of goods within de-commodified rituals of exchange. Drawing a line from Arvatov's productivist focus on socialist consumption to the expansive Soviet storage economy, he argues that the strategic allocation and withdrawal of goods produced 'a regime of valuation that celebrated the incommensurability rooted in the privileging position of use-value in the Soviet system of things'.[66] As Strada's Soviet clothing line and the publicity around the Eleventh Five-Year plan demonstrate, in the absence of an efficient, functional Productivism during the moment of Late Socialism, social actors in Russia and Italy alike continued to draw on its ideology for a range of contradictory projects: facilitating transnational trade between state-managed and capitalist markets; considering the productive consumption of cultural commodities like clothing; fulfilling and resisting new desires and demands for luxury imports; drawing connections between historical or projected revolutionary avantgarde moments; or demystifying these very intentions through ironic orientations to the 'economic horror' genre.

While *Krokodil* satirists panned the 'future' for stagnation-era workers and consumers, Radical designers gradually abandoned their identification with the Soviet historical avantgarde. Strada dropped her proposal to update 1920s constructivist worker outfits for her Summer '84 line when

[64] Following Trotsky's discussion of Uneven and Combined Development, Neil Davidson describes the process whereby the Soviet state borrows from Western European machine technology, but only in order to preserve stagnation-era working conditions as 'debased adaptation'. Neil Davidson, 'Uneven and Combined Development: Modernity, Modernism, Revolution', *rs21: Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century* (2017), 52. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/84340602.pdf (last visited April 2022).

[65] Serguei Oushakine, '"Against the Cult of Things": On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination', *The Russian Review*, 73, 2 (2014), 198–236. See discussion of the Leningrad shoe market study (207–8) and Mikhail Zhvanetskii's satire (226–9).

[66] Oushakine, *Against the Cult of Things*, 235.

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the light industry ministry instructed her to draw up generic modern clothing that could be easily mass produced. Meanwhile, introducing the Italian translation of Irina Jasinskaja's *Fabrics of the Russian Revolution*, Branzi turned his attention from utopian constructivism to the compromised aesthetics of the New Economic Plan: 'The NEP rediscovered the alternative use of capital, no longer a communism of equal impoverishment, but one of equal wealth, luxury, decoration, bourgeois pleasures for everyone, the climate of liberty for bourgeois means, inserted into the logic of workers, and salaried ministers, all to apply deco motifs to restaurants, airplanes and power plants'.[67] Decorative textiles embodied the NEP's adoption of Western bourgeois living standards, which in turn analogised how, by the 1980s, Branzi's fellow designers were shifting from Neo-Productivism toward postmodern decoration. The notorious Memphis collective in particular became increasingly preoccupied with the surface qualities of luxury commodities, and as Catharine Rossi has shown, worked closely with industrial district fabricators such as Abet Laminati to achieve high quality results.[68]

For Branzi, revolutionary decoration once promised to transcend its applied status, spreading freely as pure pattern. It 'overcomes the limits of a given product and the singular application in order to become a universal project, a model of a new world'.[69] The infinitely unfurling hammer and sickle signalled the permanent revolution of a unified, international workers' movement. Yet, in the wake of NEP, Soviet decoration became 'emptied of any innovative content and is now a schizophrenic, stammering repetition of signs; the decorative pattern transforms into a sequence of Pavlovian stimulations to increase the secretion of the political glands of the citizens attaining, across this monotony, their total ideological conformity'.[70] For Branzi, NEP served as a historical proxy for the dawning era of multinational capitalism, the endlessly proliferating hammer and sickle motif denatured into projects premised on automated self-replication; Suprematism turned into the playful shapes of New Wave; decoration became brand.[71]

## From Neo-Productivism to Brand Management

Branzi's allegory of NEP decoration and Strada's Soviet foray revealed how, by the 1980s, designers, advertisers, and luxury service providers were increasingly able to exploit small industrial firms and districts as they looked to gain a foothold in the new markets of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia. By the mid 1980s, while Branzi entered into speculative endeavours including teaching, competition proposals, and conceptual multiples for the art market, Strada established her own label based on flexible clothing (*abito flessibile*).[72] She operated production lines in small facilities on the Milanese periphery and opened stores in Oporto and Lisbon under her name, marking her entrance into the retail sector as she continued to work on a freelance basis for multinational firms: ski jackets and accessories for Dolomite, slips and pantyhose for Zegna, motorcycle suits for Yamaha. Her orientation to global markets took place within broader Third Italy manufacturing transformations that affected

[67] Andrea Branzi, 'La decorazione-rivoluzione in un solo paese'. Introduction to Irina Jasinskaja, *I tessuti della rivoluzione russa* (Florence: Idea Books, 1983), 5–6. For a roughly contemporaneous invocation of the Soviet NEP as a way of dealing with the crisis of the Italian Left, see Daniel Spaulding's 'Translator's Introduction: The Victory of Defeat', which provides historical context to Raffaele Sbardella's 'The NEP of Classe Operaia' (1980). *Viewpoint Magazine*, 28 Jan. 2016: https://viewpointmag.com/2016/01/28/ (last visited April 2022).

[68] Rossi, *Crafting Design in Italy*, 138–88.

[69] Branzi, *La decorazione-rivoluzione*, 5. The trope of endless proliferation proved crucial to the Radical designers' utopian conception of spatial organisation by the end of the 1960s through projects including Branzi's *No-Stop City* (1969) and Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* (1969).

[70] Branzi, *La decorazione-rivoluzione*, 6.

[71] Self-replicating works include Sottsass's *Bacterio* laminate (1978), Alchimia's *Mobile Infinito* (1981) and Nathalie Du Pasquier's *Gabon* (1982) textiles for Memphis. For a prescient critique of Radical design's utopian tendencies: Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e Utopia: architettura e sviluppo capitalistico* (Rome: Laterza, 1973); cf. Branzi's more sympathetic retrospective account: Andrea Branzi, *Una generazione esagerata, Dai radical Italiani alla crisi della globalizziazione* (Milan: Baldini and Castoldi, 2014).

[72] Nanni Strada, *Moda Design* (Milan: Editoriale Modo, 1998).

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the labour conditions of the districts and the quality of their output. When the mid-1970s economic crisis reached the fashion industry, large firms began to skirt union restrictions by offloading phases of their production onto smaller firms, who could change the rules around entering and exiting the market and cut costs at a moment's notice in an attempt to establish a more flexible labour force.[73] As Mari recognised already at the end of the 1970s, 'artisanal quality may be either manufactured in work-conditions and at a wage level at least comparable with those found in industry, or else in conditions very much inferior'.[74] Flexibility came to mean unconstrained employer control: the full utilisation of production; autonomy over who could be employed and considered an employee; how workers were paid; and the conditions of employment: hiring, furloughing, and firing at will, the very catalysts to the ongoing strikes at the branch plants of *Il Manto e la Pelle's* sponsor Calza Bloch throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[75]

By the 1990s, as luxury firms shifted their focus to global marketing, they began outsourcing Made-in-Italy production processes to sweatshops within the industrial districts in Italy or abroad, predominantly in Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and Turkey.[76] Many scholars have pointed out how the historic textile-apparel districts of Prato, the paradigmatic case of Third Italy innovation during the postwar period, maintained their global dominance over fast fashion in the face of international competition, not merely through ad hoc renovations to the production process, new equipment, or via innovative collaboration and batch production, but through a more exploitative flexibility marked by striking gender disparities, the use of Wenzhounese immigrant labour, subcontractual homeworkers, intensified family work, poor safety conditions, unpaid overtime, the shirking of tax codes, and other forms of manipulation as working conditions and skill levels deteriorated in the wake of lower profit margins and increased austerity.[77]

When small firms outsourced the conception and production of their goods to specialised firms abroad and began licensing their niche labels to multinationals for limited distribution runs, designers took on new in-house responsibilities revolving around brand management: 'unify[ing] design, manufacture, marketing under a "brand identity"'.[78] Rather than intervene into the means of production, as Strada and Branzi once intended, designers began to provide the concept and narrative through which collections would be promoted, ultimately providing ideological cover for labels as they became increasingly removed from the historic artisanal districts that accorded them surplus value and monopoly rents.[79] As firms became increasingly enmeshed in global trade, the designer's talent for conjuring and circulating 'economic narratives' came to replace their technical innovations in the means and relations of production or the form of their commodities.[80]

If in the 1990s, designers 'managed the dark side of globalisation' by tying their products to artisanal traditions and sources that no longer played a part in their fabrication, they have lately preferred to tarry with the exploitative dimensions of global outsourcing as a marketing ploy to authenticate their

[73] A Graziani, 'Aspetti struturali dell'economia italiana nell'ultimo decennio', in A. Graziani, ed., *Crisi e ristrutturazione nell'economia italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975); M. Paci, 'Crisi, ristrutturazione e piccolo impresa', *Inchiesta,* 20 (1975), 3–8.

[74] Enzo Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano* (Firenze: Electa, 1981), 12.

[75] Stefania Cigarini, 'C'era una volta una fabbrica: Dal calzificio reggiano alla Calza Bloch. Storia di un'industria al femminile', *Ricerche Storiche*, 125 (2018), 35–51. For a broader discussion of the 'intolerable conditions of underpaid labour' in the industrial districts: Brutti and Calistri, *Industrial Districts*, 134–41.

[76] Maria Chiarvesio , Eleonora Di Maria and Stefano Micelli, 'Global Value Chains and Open Networks: The Case of Italian Industrial Districts', *European Planning Studies*, 18, 3 (2010), 333–50.

[77] Calvin Chen, 'Made in Italy (by the Chinese): Migration and the Rebirth of Textiles and Apparel', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 20, 1 (2015), 111–26; Fabio Sforzi, 'The Geography of Industrial Districts', in Edward Goodman and Julia Bamford, eds., *Small Firms and Industrial Districts in Italy* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[78] Constantine Nakassis, 'Brands and their Surfeits', *Cultural Anthropology*, 28, 1 (2013), 111–26; Paul Manning, 'Semiotics of Brand', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39 (2010), 33–49.

[79] Ivan Paris, *Oggetti cuciti: l'abbigliamento pronto in Italia dal primo dopoguerra agli anni Settanta* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006), 500–3.

[80] Robert Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

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**Figure 13.** Gosha Rubchinskiy, Spring 2017 Men's Wear Collection presented during Pitti Uomo at the Manifattura Tabacchi, 2016. Photograph: Dario Garofalo.

commodities.[81] Where Branzi once discovered a perverse pleasure in the compromised communism of NEP textiles, the contemporary Russian designer Gosha Rubchinskiy recently revived the historic Italian streetwear brand Fila, which had moved from the historic Piedmontese textile district of Biella, only to become the property of the US hedge fund Cerberus Capital, until it was sold off to a brand subsidiary in Seoul, whose profits largely derive from leasing the Fila label to the Chinese multinational, Anta Sports. Rubchinskiy promoted the vernacular reception of the brand within Eastern European reactionary working-class youth culture, ultimately to the acclaim of cosmopolitan critics at Pitti Uomo 2017 who could feel the frisson of Uneven and Combined Development emanating from the shaved heads and ill-fitting track suits of grimacing models who sullenly traversed an abandoned tobacco factory on the Florentine outskirts, which would itself become a fashionable creative industry incubator in a matter of years (Figure 13). The neoliberal trope of resilience, once confined to the precision of a garment's assembly and elasticity of its materials, now came to mean hedging against the risks of fluctuating labour costs, prices, and consumer desire, testifying to how the brand survived multiple rounds of mergers and bankruptcy as it traversed zones of progressive industrialisation and deindustrialisation, improbably hopping from the nadir of cheaply made casual apparel to the apex of high fashion.[82]

Flexible specialisation once presented the seductive prospect that cooperative networks of engineers, artisans and designers working mostly outside of the workers' movement and without union representation in niche industries might preserve or even reskill their crafts, whether in ceramic tiles or medical devices, textiles or chemicals. Through bricolage and continual experimentation, they pushed their machinery to perform surprising feats, prompting their small firms to stay alert to the volatility of global markets and shifts in the composition and level of demand over the later postwar period.

[81] Nebahat Tokatli, '"Made in Italy? Who Cares!": Prada's New Economic Geography', *Geoforum*, 54 (2014), 1–9.

[82] A year after its use in Rubchinskiy's collection, the Fila logo became the basis of the luxury brand Fendi's Fendi-Mania collection in 2018. Nello Barile, *Dress Coding: Moda e stili dalla strada al Metaverso* (Milan: Maltemi, 2022).

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In the wake of the 1980s debt crises and deregulation, however, capital itself became more flexible and separate from the manufacturing of physical commodities. Equity-driven finance infiltrated the industrial districts, acquiring small firms and often driving them out of business. Gains from proprietary technologies in production and logistics were no longer channeled back into research and development, but toward investors, stock buy-backs, strategic acquisitions, and stifling competition wherever possible through patent lawsuits and hostile takeovers. Meanwhile, employers in manufacturing learned to flexibly manage their labour force through conciliation and repression.[83]

Divorced from the means and relations of production, designers abandoned their role within the technical intelligentsia and instead took on the speculative task of managing the brand's image so that it would appeal to and commodify the imaginaries of its consumer audience. While flexible specialisation wanes into obsolescence as a labour configuration therefore, its branded aesthetic flourishes through an imaginary of artisanal tinkering, micro-finance, the 'sharing' economy, and social entrepreneurship. As these highly aspirational visions become increasingly divorced from the precarious material conditions of the contemporary workplace, they displace their leitmotif of flexibility onto the psychic and physical fitness of individuals, rather than the longstanding subcultural, kinship, or municipal networks that buttressed the industrial districts during the 1970s and 1980s. Heartwarming scenes of family-owned businesses, against-all-odds startup innovation, and logistical serendipity propagate a nostalgic and repressive ideology thereby, shaping the public sentiment and policy that guides the uneven distribution of social welfare. Whether this stratification might lead to a new Productivism depends largely on the ability of workers to design countermanding images rooted in their collective organisation.

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[83] As Micelli points out, there are important exceptions to this general history of deterioration outside of the realm of fashion and textiles, especially in 'tech' districts that employ and produce advanced technologies, rely on highly skilled artisans, and maintain relationships and pipelines with polytechnical institutes. Stafano Micelli, *Fare è innovare. Il nuovo lavoro artigiano* (Milan: Il Mulino, 2014); Marco Bettiol and Stefano Micelli, eds., *Design e creatività nel made in Italy: proposte per i distretti industriali* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005).

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