

# THIS EDGE OF THE "VALLEY"

ANIMALI DOMESTICI

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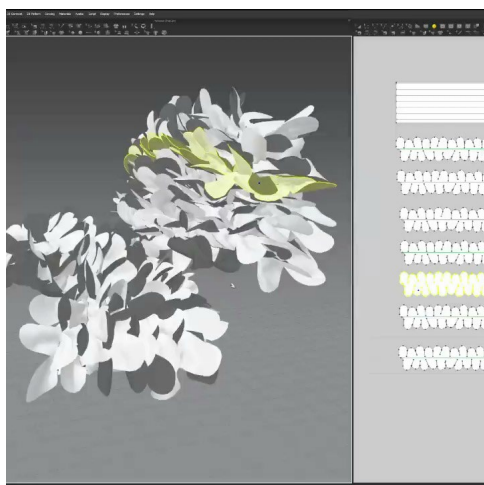
“Hortensia” Andrés Reisinger, rendering, July 2018

In February 2016 an elementary school kid from the vicinity of Ferrara (Italy) submitted, jointly with his teacher, an application to the “Accademia della Crusca”, the oldest linguistics academy in the world, to propose including the new word “petaloso”, which literally means “petal-y”, in the Italian language. The official reply from the academy, explains that «a new word does not enter the vocabulary when someone invents it, even if it is a “beautiful” and useful word. For it to enter a vocabulary, in fact, the new word must not be known and used only by those who invented it, but it’s necessary that many people use it and many people understand it.» And continues: «That’s how it works: it’s not the scholars, the ones who make dictionaries, who decide which new words are beautiful or ugly, useful or useless. When a new word is on everyone’s (or many’s) lips, then the scholar understands that that word has become a word like the others and puts it in the vocabulary.»

Such news had all the perfect ingredients to not pass unobserved in online media and, after being bounced around in a few newspaper websites, it quickly spiralled up, when the Italian prime minister retweeted the hashtag #petaloso.



"Hortensia" Andrés Reisinger, NFT video, 2021



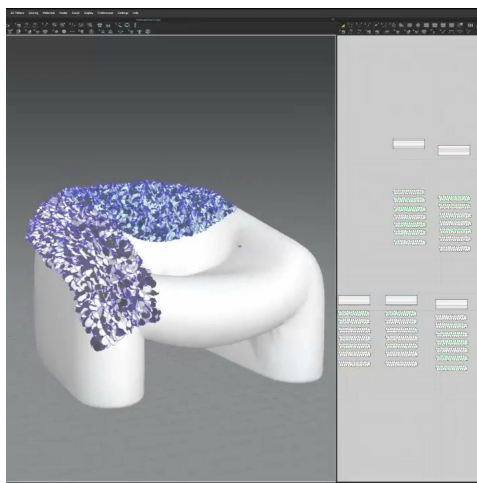
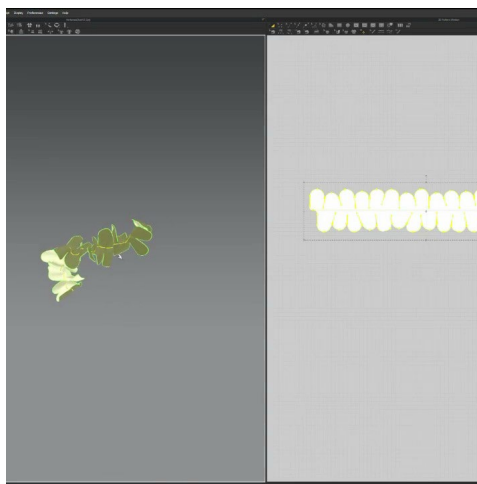
Thereafter, the temptation of capitalizing a bit more on those assets, and bringing them into the IRL market seemed, in fact, quite easy to fulfil and the Dutch design brand MOOI approached the designer to get Hortensia to finally transition into "actual" reality.

Materializing a puffy little armchair in an era when consumer-level CAD CAM manufacturing is in the ordinary toolkit of many design students might not seem a big challenge, but that could be a rather superficial assumption.

Considering how much the success of Hortensia was probably related to its petal-ness, the crafting of the petals had obviously become a legitimate R&D quest, that Reisinger embraced teaming up with Barcelona-based product designer Júlia Esqué.

It's hard to assess whether flowers might be agents of virality, but a recent notable case of social media fame in the design world concerns an objectively petal-y object, the armchair "Hortensia" by Argentinian designer Andrés Reisinger, which first appeared as a pink rendering on the author's Instagram account in July 2018.

When in early 2021 the blockchain officially met the world of big auction houses, as Christie's auctioned a digital work by Beeple for almost 70 mln USD, the dream of having liquid investment assets, like artworks, even more liquid, like bitcoins, Non-Fungible Token (NFT) trading exploded overnight. After an initial period when the GIF of a cat (Nyan) could reach more than half a million dollars, the game switched quickly to digital artworks that had some form of actual recognition, like, for instance, appealing renderings of petaly armchairs.



"Hortensia" Andrés Reisinger, modelling process stills from the author's Instagram profile



The process was somehow different from typical material experimentation for a piece of design furniture, as it already had from the very beginning a highly specific target, that was not only portrayed in concept proposal imagery, as in any conventional design development process but had already been around the web in countless feeds and publications for quite some time.

How could reality disappoint this collective dream of petalhood?

A compelling process of testing unfolded, prompting the idea of recompiling moments of that into a short documentary video, which would add to the marketing promotion of the upcoming chair. The footage documents how carefully sewing different kinds of textiles, previously laser-cut into patterns, finally allowed matching the 3d software modifier and particle system that enabled the petals to “bloom” in the ether.



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“Hortensia” Andrés Reisinger with Júlia Esqué for MOOOI, stills from the production process video

Getting closer to the boundary between unreality and reality could in fact trigger some peculiar psychological reactions that might turn out to be very valuable in the era of the attention economy. Discussing the unclear «relationship of an image to the world» of some highly realistic architectural renderings, American scholar Susan Piedmont-Palladino notes that reaching that fine line «we experience an eerie sensation», because also in design and architecture, there is some form of “uncanny valley”, the phenomenon baptized by roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970 in reference to the sinister appearance of too-realistic-but-not-quite-yet humanoid robots. In Mori’s diagram between “affinity” (that stands for familiarity) and “human-likeness”, the former steadily increases with progressive resemblance until a sudden drop (the infamous valley) when the robot becomes quite similar to a human, but not enough, becoming instead, somewhat creepy.



"Hortensia" Andrés Reisinger with Júlia Esqué for M0001, stills from the production process video

The provocative potential of blurring the boundaries of reality seems to be highly related to a manipulation of the very notion of "familiarity" Palladino noted how Freud «uses the German terms heimlich and unheimlich, first emphasizing their opposite meanings of familiar and unfamiliar; but then, as if entering an infinity of mirrors, he argues that the differences start to collapse as what is known begins to seem strange, and as what is unfamiliar appears to be known.» (Palladino, 2018) She observes in some contemporary super-realistic digital imagery an «exquisite confusion between real and unreal, heimlich and unheimlich», which we could consider being the actual "uncanny" touch.



"Hortensia" Andrés Reisinger with Júlia Esqué for M0001, product showcase



"Uncanny Spaces" Christoffer Jansson, Bachelor thesis project, Konstfack University 2022



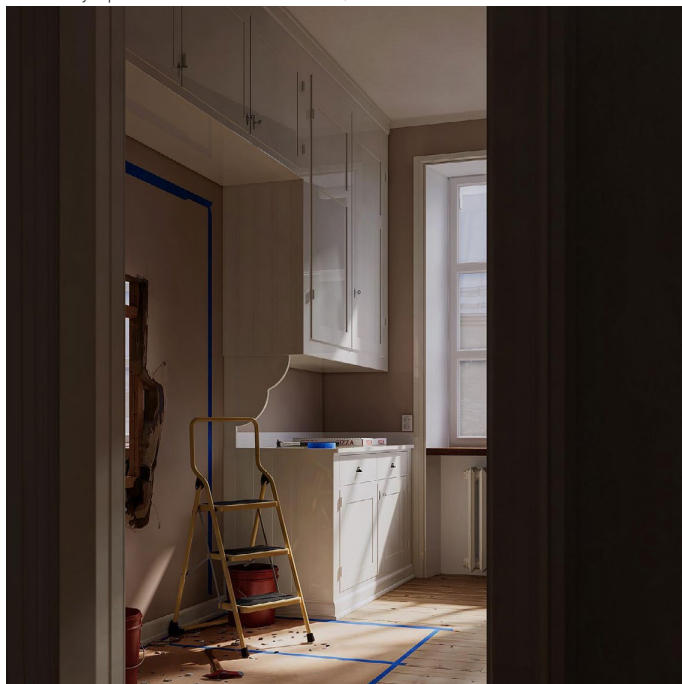
This buzzword appears also in the title of the project "Uncanny Spaces" by Swedish designer Christoffer Jansson, which, nevertheless, at first sight, does not seem to embody the conventional interpretation of the term uncanny, as it portrays in a series of tasteful interior shots of the renovation process of an apartment in central Stockholm.

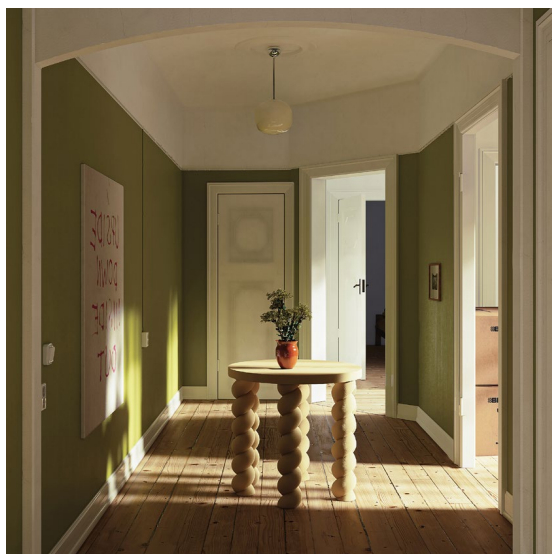
The flat makeover was actually a fiction, staged to trick his Instagram audience and it did achieve the objective of attracting attention, probably because it had an "uncanny" feeling generated by the strategic blurring of reality boundaries.

The virtual apartment was modelled based on a real one, found in real estate listings and visited by Jansson in an open showcase, which has been progressively populated with cardboard boxes and bags, containing models of detailed immaterial reproductions of a very specific selection of his belongings.

Jansson decided to push it further by «making the renders evermore eerily perfect to see if his followers would notice that the apartment was fake – although none ever did» (Hahn, 2023)

"Uncanny Spaces" Christoffer Jansson, 2022





"Uncanny Spaces" Christoffer Jansson, Bachelor thesis project, Konstfack University 2022

In relation to processes of image construction, Palladino suggests a fundamental "implicit question" about their intended relationship with the world. And we might extend that, perhaps more importantly, wondering what to do with the provocative potential that they hold.

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"Uncanny Spaces" Christoffer Jansson, Bachelor thesis project, Konstfack University 2022

“There is the concept of the chair, the image of the chair, and then the materialization/fabrication of the chair, and they all refer to a more perfect version of each other.”  
Joshua Citarella

New York-based artist Joshua Citarella here is not referring at all to Hostensia, but is, instead, discussing the boundary of reality and “potential reality” in relation to his own project “Ultraviolet Production House”, an online artworks store hosted on Etsy, developed together with Brad Troemel. That threshold seems to be a relevant space in many of his works, especially in some of his true-scale constructed reality images, like *SWIM a Few Years From Now* (2017) or *Use-Value Urban Repurposing* (2021). These depict speculative scenarios, both futures and alternative presents, that very directly instigate witty critical commentaries on the lifestyles associated with certain political ideological outlines, which he extensively investigates in his work through live-streams and publications.

“SWIM a Few Years From Now” Joshua Citarella, 2017







"Use-Value Urban Repurposing" Joshua Citarella, 2021

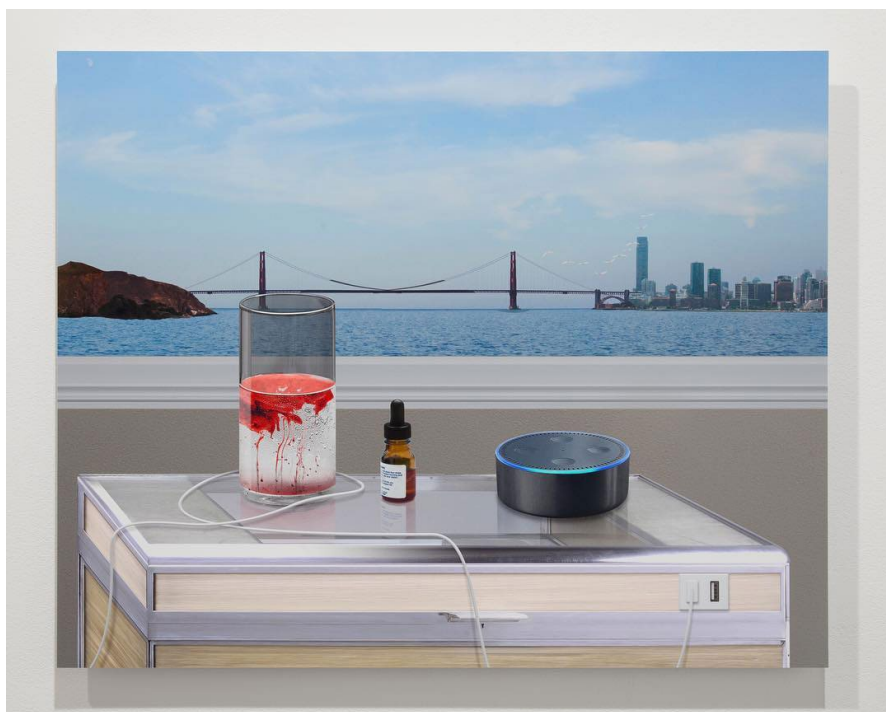
These images seem to resonate in multiple ways with methods used in the field of Critical Design, as outlined by Anthony Dunne in his seminal book *Hertzian Tales* (1999).

Highlighting that «clear-cut modeling of the future is too didactic», Dunne recalls Marcuse's take on the art's need to provoke estrangement and dislocation of the audience to be "effective".

Citarella's highly realistic digital images, like "material tales", «mix criticism with optimism to provide the "complicated pleasure" found in other imaginative media such as film and literature, particularly those that explore boundaries between the real and the unreal» (Dunne, 1999)

Moreover, they exploit the «surprising power of stills, compared to video or film», as in the example of the famous "Untitled Film Stills series" by Cindy Sherman, «the viewer tries to imagine what happened before and after, he or she is drawn into speculation on the psychology of the protagonists and their state of mind» (Dunne, 1999)

"Use-Value Urban Repurposing" Joshua Citarella, 2021





"Deeprecession" Shawn Maximo, 2019

A distinctive critical take is also immediate in the "what if" scenarios created by Canadian artist Shawn Maximo, which also explore the liminal fringes between the real and the virtual world. Depicting an isolated escapist society located "deep into mountainous caves", the exhibition 'Deeprecession' contains a series of computer-generated renderings that suggest reflections on the imbalances behind neoliberal mechanisms of growth and their associated spread of "depression".

Nevertheless, the images retain an unsettling sensation, as they «appear at the same time full of beauty and even hope, while also depicting alarming juxtapositions of more sinister programs and interests» What is eerie might be, in fact, many unexpected or inappropriate objects found in the scenes, like the "streamer" circle camera light in a clinical environment related to reproduction, but also the two Eames chairs that narrate about an audience observing from the back of the scene.

Within the field of architecture, those elements, like objects, vegetation, and even human figures are technically considered complementary to the main focus on the space, yet they effectively largely constitute the symbolical message of the image.

In his book "Reality modeled after images", Michael Young explains their role in analogy to the depiction of "entourage" in drawings, a technique from the beaux arts school tradition including, for instance, the portrait of plants and outdoor components in plans, sections, and perspectives drawings. He notes that entourage influences three important aspects of the perception of architecture projects through images, which are scenario, audience, and obviously, familiarity.

«Architecture found that in its relation to montage, aspects of these arguments could be brought to bear on its representations, and through this, the imaging of architecture could engage social, technological, ecological, and political commentary and critique.»

«Entourage renders social events and programmatic inhabitation, but it does so in service of evoking attitude, demeanor, and interaction [ ... ] rather than overtly narrating a story.»

"Deeprecession" Shawn Maximo, 2019



When do the constructed imagery from speculative realities and their ambiguous positioning with regard to the degree of realism and of reality itself become instrumental to a design proposition, leveraging the uncanny potential?

The perspective of “design fiction” might help to frame the role of images and artefacts within a critical objective, as addressed in the actual definition of the field by sci-fi author Bruce Sterling, summarized as the «deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change» [Sterling, 2013]. He actually also adds a relevant remark to that definition noting that «design fiction doesn’t tell stories - instead, it designs prototypes that imply a changed world». Somehow we could consider that, depicting a speculative alternative scenario, also through the strategic use of narrative entourage, share a similar target of portraying that “changed” world. In this sense, «design fiction is a creative act that puts the viewer into a different conceptual space - for a while» [Sterling, 2013].

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“KK Post-Vernacular: DIY practices of more-than-human care” Animali Domestici, 2020

Aiming for the actualization of that changed world, nonetheless, would oftentimes oblige to compromise substantially its critical or speculative potential. Dunne makes clear that the “functionality” of these design artefacts is to act as materialized props through which alternative stories emerge that operate in the space between rationality and reality. Leveraging the seductive language of design, design artefacts are crafted to provoke people to imagine it in use and the possible future that would manifest around it (Wakkary, Odom, Hauser, Hertz, Lin, 2015) to «become lost in a space between desire and determinism», which very much reminds us of some segment of the reality spectrum perhaps not far from the famous “uncanny valley”. This space, as the liminal space between reality and unreality, presents a wide variety of shades and gradients of “realism”, whose intentional and careful manipulation, through the use of a number of tools and techniques mentioned earlier, is what could allow its strategic instrumentality.

KK Post-Vernacular: DIY practices of more-than-human care by Animali Domestici (Alicia Lazzaroni & Antonio Bernacchi) is a set of speculative hacks for details of conventional types of mundane Thai houses in a perspective of improved coexistence.

Inserting “edible” timber essences in the tectonics alongside structural components made of „unwanted” wood (Teak, for instance, naturally contains oils that repel most insects), it attempts to utilize the materiality of the built environment to create welcoming spaces for non-humans, like insects of different kinds. It looks at the Thai pop-vernacular repertoire, at the material networks of scrapyards and markets, and at the range of works that could be done with little budget by familiar carpenters, who are still in charge of their daily maintenance, like replacing damaged timber planks or painting the facade.

“KK Post-Vernacular: DIY practices of more-than-human care” Animali Domestici, 2020

The project was exhibited at Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2021 through a 1:1 physical prototype and, at the same time, narrated in the official biennale publication through a “comic strip”. A series of digital renderings showcasing the details applied on a generic house envisioned the details within their environment. The images were formatted in the strip together with real surface treatment tests of the prototype development by the authors and with pictures of the material sourcing, where actual reality and the narrated alternatives can find adjacent spaces in the audience’s imagination, contextualizing the prototypes in a more subtle way, but at the same time influencing their conception in a continuous feedback loop.



Hardware Stories is another project by Animali Domestici in collaboration with Jakob Sieder-Semlitsch and Lynn Hyun Kieffer, which intentionally swings back and forth between fictional and real. It is a catalogue of seemingly “normal” yet eccentric solutions, tools, and routines to modify or manufacture DIY new floor components, that encourage beneficial more-than-humans complementarities both at micro and macro scales. The aggregate floor surface, with its patchwork of materials, processes, practices, and rituals, attempts to explore the potential of qualities inspired and required by an expanded notion of cohabitation. Those components, which are both mundane and exceptional, relate to a quirky set of DIY tools to make and maintain them and suggest the establishment of curious connections, supported by a condition of familiar estrangement.

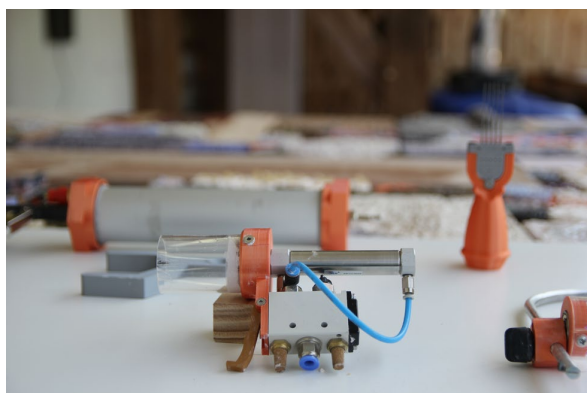


“Hardware Stories” Animali Domestici with Jakob Sieder-Semlitsch and Lynn Hyun Kieffer, 2022

They fundamentally question the logic of sterilization, through the design of a series of cavities, porosities, tunnels, and edges, with different roughness, textures, and proportions, in order to generally increase their bio-receptivity.

The contextual image developed for this visual essay expands the entourage around the project components, hinting at the “speculative normality” of their sociocultural milieu, which enables us to imagine some of the possible relationships and influences between that and the components’ development. Perhaps, paraphrasing Michael Young, reality and image continuously model each other?





"Hardware Stories" Animali Domestici with Jakob Sieder-Semlitsch and Lynn Hyun Kieffer, 2022

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