

# Introduction

## The Desire to Discuss Innovation and Method

This book aims to analyze a way of working. Not to exalt it, but to describe it with the hope that we can discuss a “method” through which art can enter business, a method that is conscious and structured, not a random encounter or one linked to a fad. The heart of the book brings together some of the main interventions that various artists have created in companies thanks to the Ermanno Casoli Foundation (hereafter the “FEC”). Yet the authors of this book will not provide only a description of how artists can work in a business – with its management, employees, spaces, brand, and products – but they try to provide the reader with a theoretical framework in which to situate a series of experiences: those in which artists create works of art together with a company, so that it is possible to take a deeper and more conscious look at the collaboration between art and organizational life.

So why speak of “innovation” and the FEC “method” in the title of the book? The word method recalls the possibility to structure an activity in a formal and stable way, to give continuity to one’s actions, to have a benchmark to understand and evaluate them, and thus to have the opportunity to present them legitimately to the relevant communities. The FEC has the goal of promoting the entry of contemporary art into companies in order to stimulate processes of renewal of the ways of working, and of perceiving the environment and work relationships, according to a systematic and replicable approach.

To understand how the goal of innovation and method can coexist with contemporary art and how they coexist in this book, it is important to use these introductory pages to present some of the fundamental traits of the FEC and its initiatives. Starting in the introduction, we will cite

certain artistic interventions that the artists have carried out with the FEC, with the goal of intriguing the reader and encouraging further investigation that will take place in the the following chapters chapters and the final project summaries.

The FEC was created in memory of Ermanno Casoli, the founder of Elica, an art lover and an artist himself, whose personality can be found not only in the name of the Foundation, but also in some of the characteristics of its identity and positioning. The FEC is not only linked to the figure of Ermanno Casoli, but also to the Elica company, its principal supporter and the location where it most often has the opportunity to experience the interventions with the artists before promoting them in other companies, always sharing the distinctive values that the two identities have in common.

Those values that link FEC, Elica, and Ermanno Casoli can be summarized thanks to some apparently conflicting conceptual dimensions: experimentation and replicability; the refinement of processes and the involvement of people.

### Experimentation and replicability

The concept of experimentation implies the idea of searching, of going beyond current knowledge through application and empirical trial. The work with art that the FEC has encouraged in companies is a complex process, that implies a dialogue between the artist and the company, able to inaugurate a new way of seeing, feeling, and operating, that may be destabilizing, but whose meaning all of the employees are able to reconstruct.

Think of a project like *I Saettatori* (The Darters) by Francesco Barocco, where the artist and Elica employees are involved in the experimentation of a technique and the realization of a work. This involvement takes place both in company and cultural places, allowing the employees to have multifaceted experiences in different contexts and play different roles. Or consider *Teste* (Heads), in which the artist Francesco Arena organizes a series of encounters with Elica employees in a preparatory phase, to arrive at a composition that is complex, consisting of different ideas, tools, and artifacts, that range from photographs to sculptures, and ultimately to an installation conceived to change, disappear, and be

reborn in a new form over time. This inclination to seek challenges and experiment was also a characteristic of Ermanno Casoli. His daughter Cristina Casoli, president of the FEC, tells us:

My father was not born an entrepreneur; he was a veterinarian satisfied with what he did, but he wasn't afraid to completely change his profession and daily routine. When he married my mother, he jumped into this new "enterprise" of founding a business that made hoods [...] so we saw him go from being a veterinarian to fiddling with a hand drill to make the hoods himself.

Experimentation is a value that the FEC shares with Elica, a "laboratory" and "incubator" in which to try to develop interventions of various kinds that involve artists. The company, despite maintaining its identity as a place of production, through the presence of art and artists intends to develop laterality of thinking and reflection, as explained by Francesco Casoli, the chairman of Elica:

In the company there is a constant presence of people who apparently have no link with industrial production, such as artists, architects, and art historians. But this presence is voluntary, intentional. It is important to have agents to destabilize norms and procedures, able to create that discontinuity that is decisive to be competitive in the market.

In the authors' intentions, the concept of experimentation must be accompanied by that of replicability. Replicability implies the possibility for an activity or artifact to be reproduced multiple times. In our common understanding, it seems to be an oxymoron to associate replicability with experimentation. In this case, replicability indicates the FEC's desire to work with artists and companies to understand what happens from their encounters and create a "prototype" that, with all of the adjustments necessary for different contexts, becomes replicable in other company settings. This is done with the hope that the art itself, in time and through a more structured approach, will become an occasion for innovation and change with respect to the numerous other "metaphors," training tools and management consulting. The possibility to replicate derives from the opportunity, guaranteed by the Foundation's structure, to construct long-term relationships with artists, to understand their methods of work and how they can satisfy, more or less effectively, the needs of the companies that open their doors to an intervention with contemporary art.

Replicability and experimentation are thus very close concepts in the life of the FEC and Elica. If we think of one of the first workshops, *Dal progetto all'oggetto* (From the Design to the Object, 2008) carried out by Ettore Favini, Christian Frosi, and Nico Vascellari, we can comprehend this association. At the center of the intervention created by the three artists is the theme of design as a fundamental methodological passage in the development of both a work of art and an industrial product, but also of the elaboration of new concepts and new emotional categories. Therefore, design thinking is not typical only of the creative process, but of any solid process of research and study, including in areas different from art. This entails an awareness that the two processes – art and production – are not so far apart, when they are distinguished by a rigorous procedures and methods. Francesco Casoli in describing the relationship between Elica, the FEC, and the world of art, says:

It is fundamental to communicate to the world of industrial production that those who make art and creativity their life, spend their energy systematically in searching. This connection is relevant so that those who work in traditional processes can accept with more awareness the entry of art into their work situation.

Respecting the originality of the work, the artistic process, and the needs of the company that request it, the goal of the FEC is to form an attachment with artists and companies that do not have a dogmatic and rigid approach, searching for an alternative method of working. The FEC, in turn, studies and articulates this method to make the organizational part replicable and transform the inevitable conflicts and misunderstandings that can arise in the encounter between art and companies into elements of value.

### **The refinement of the processes and the involvement of people**

The refinement of a process implies the fact that it is designed with advanced and precise criteria, so as to be as effective as possible. To “refine” also implies the ability to learn what can be modified and improved, establishing a connection, as a “third period,” with the phases of experimentation and replication described previously. A distinctive characteristic of the FEC’s approach is that of creating complex artistic interventions that require different timings and techniques with respect

to the traditional way of introducing art into companies, with artifacts and “intermediate” events that find meaning in the concluding phase of the work. Among the best examples is what was created by the work of Francesco Barocco, that we have already cited above, with *I Saettatori* at Elica in 2011, working around the artistic practice of engraving, its history, its concepts, and its techniques, involving the company’s employees in an experience that transformed their status from that of “pupils” to that of “artists,” and ultimately to “art historians,” guides and mentors of other colleagues, borrowing the categories of the artistic world to revive their company spaces. Getting to the heart of business questions to reflect on the theme of economic exchange, *L’intelligenza del caso* (The Intelligence of Chance) – the workshop created by Cesare Pietroiusti again at Elica – was structured through the creation of artifacts produced with paper, wine and smoke, but also with concepts such as the exchange and duration of the work of art, to set in motion a dynamic of reflection that took shape during the activities and continued afterwards thanks to the continued presence of the works at the company. These are only two examples of how the planning of an artistic intervention can reach such advanced levels, as regards both the concepts on which to reflect, and the processes through which to convey them.

Experimenting and maintaining memory allows the FEC to always make improvements and continuously renew the artistic interventions, so that this innovative contribution can reach the Foundation’s stakeholders and above all the employees of the companies with which it interacts. In fact, together with the refinement of the artistic intervention, at the moment of its entry into a company, the FEC seeks to involve as many people as possible in the intervention, with the goal of generating new ways of thinking and feeling in a large part of the organization.

Although the FEC has also carried out activities for more limited populations, the interventions usually foresee the involvement of a large number of people, even the employees of an entire factory, joined together in interfunctional professional groups without any hierarchical distinction. This desire for involvement contains a goal functional to the well-being and performance of the people who work in the company. As Francesco Casoli says:

Our goal is to engage the largest number of employees, and since the company is multinational, we should also attempt to reach with art the different nations

and continents in which we operate. If laterality of thinking must become a widespread skill, it is important to systematically reach many organizational populations.

This goal of engagement also reflects the spirit of Ermanno Casoli, that emerges in the words of his daughter Cristina:

When my father painted a picture he never created it only for himself, closed in a studio; to the contrary, he made sure that many others contributed to his painting. He was a man who loved having people around him to give a hand or even only to ask a question.

In the chapters that follow, the authors, alternating between theoretical rationalization, illustration of practice, and artistic treatment, will attempt to explain this “method” of work and its implications for generating innovation at different levels of companies, trusting that a critical debate will be triggered, with a growing presence of artists and contemporary art in companies.

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