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Perera, Dulmini

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Designing in the Context of Time

On Annetta Pedretti, practising cybernetics and futuring

Dulmini Perera

Bauhaus University Weimar

The lesser-known work of cybernetician and architect Annetta Pedretti on designing in the context of time provides an alternative way to think through questions related to open-systemic practices, futuring and the politics of difference. By tracing her projects across different forms and scales (from objects to buildings), I will propose two ways Pedretti's position on time becomes significant. The first relates to the ways in which she formulated the link between time and the idea of an open-systemic practice. Pedretti's work presents a different version of better-known discussions on conversational and learning processes in systemic and second-order cybernetic practices, such as those of Gordon Pask and Ranulph Glanville. However, Pedretti's work was not limited to institutional research settings and often took place in the context of her everyday life. As such, her work is closer to the work of MC Bateson and explores what it means to “attend” and “compose differences” within everyday practices. The second relates to how Pedretti's move on making time public enables alternative ways of navigating our present—a present defined by phenomena such as accelerationism amplified by the problematic positive feedback loops between technology and design formulated within the logical categories of the market. Design and real estate relations exemplify how accelerationist processes act ontologically to take away the future of many life

forms to preserve the interests of a few. Pedretti's house at 25 Princelet Street acts to this date as a site of resistance against such processes. It provides a way of thinking through the impasse many designers face in dealing with time under defutured conditions.

KEYWORDS: Open systems, learning, futuring, second-order cybernetics, time, change, design, architecture

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Methods & Methodology, Society & Culture

Presentation description

The lesser-known work of cybernetician and architect Annetta Pedretti on designing in the context of time provides an alternative way to think through questions related to open-systemic practices, futuring and the politics of difference. Pedretti trained as an architect at the Architectural Association, completed a PhD in cybernetics and language at Brunel (1981), resided in London's 25 Princelet Street, ran a printing press, and was a beekeeper. Regardless of the different roles she took on at different moments, whether related to the reconstruction of her house, the design of a conference book, running a printing press, or sewing a flag as a form of protest, she maintained her interest in "reclaiming time" as a form of designerly resistance.

Her project takes on a new significance in the present moment that could be characterised as the end times. Design practices are confronted by the end times in many ways. It arrives with an awareness that the forms of the ecological crisis change faster than the speed at which the knowledge systems required to engage the crisis are developed (Danowski, D & Castro, 2017). The end times also arrive through multiple forms of *defuturing* where the worlds of many life forms are ended via colonising practices, whether in the form of planning policies or knowledge practices. (Brand, 1994; Fry, 2021). End times are celebrated via market disruptions created to promote fashionable new products and technologies that speak to modern notions of progress.

What is at stake in the end times is the very inability to engage the *future of the future*. Pedretti's work provides insights into modes and methods of navigating this impasse.

Pedretti explored her developing ideas on "making in the context of time" in a series of diaries where she critiqued the concept of an "explicit order" and suggested the need to focus on an "implicit order" (Pedretti, 1993). As a reflexive inquiry, the diary entries engage a wide variety of themes, such as science, objectivity, feminism, and oppression, intertwined with reflections on her daily projects, such as repairing and caring for her house. More generally, Pedretti's position on time and ordering mirrors the better-known distinction between the "measurable time" in physics (Newton, Einstein) and the "experiential time" of philosophers like Bergson and Heidegger (Rovelli, 2019; Press, 2006). The time of physics leads to better measuring, universalising, and controlling by design. The time of experience that Pedretti mentions in the context of implicit ordering leads to designerly ways of incorporating difference and resisting oppressive design practices.

More specifically, Pedretti's work emerges as a variety of discussions on open systems (institutional, educational, object-related) that were promoted by others such as von Foerster (trivial vs non-trivial machines), Herbert Brün (anti-communication), Gordon Pask (conversational and learning machines) and Glanville (internal conversation and design research) (von Foerster, 2003; Brün, 1970; Pask, 1969; Glanville, 1988). While the relevance of conversational and circular processes has been explored as ways of engaging differences in the contexts of open-systemic practice, often, none of these models places emphasis on what the conversational means as a form of claiming time (Pedretti, 1993, 2009). Pedretti's stance is evident in small-scale projects such as designing a conference book developed from the conversational exchanges during a conference (as opposed to pre-written position papers) and in larger-scale experiments such as repairing her house. Her approaches show careful consideration of second-order change processes. The focus was not on producing a design that promotes a particular value but on developing frameworks through which values can be negotiated over time. Positioning time as a binding fabric, Pedretti argued that "to cut the fabric is to cut people off existentially (oppression)" (Pedretti, 2009: 96).

Pedretti's stance on the questions of engaging difference was influenced by being a part of the Spitalfields community, which was grappling with rising numbers of immigrants and racism just as much as the intensification in gentrification processes (Rasheed, 2019; The Gentle Author, 2022). Working from the context of her household, the way she went about “attending to” and “composing difference” was radically different from how these issues were discussed in the context of the more structured institutional settings of design education (Glanville, 2015; Harding, 2008).

Moreover, Pedretti's work promoted what Mary Catherine Bateson (1994: 168) identified as an “adaptive multiculturalism” that seeks to engage the difficult task of composing communities. According to Bateson, adaptive multiculturalism is significantly different from “identity multiculturalism”, which comes from the bird’s eye view of politicians and planners who only seek to acknowledge this diversity in nominal ways. Bateson writes: identity multiculturalism is only multi from the birds-eye view of planners who acknowledge the need for many groups. Adaptive multiculturalism, by contrast, is indeed multi for the individual. It is often promoted to increase tolerance and civility, but its greatest importance is in offering multiple ways of looking at the same thing (Bateson, 168). For example, in her project for designing a multicultural flag, Pedretti set up a framework through which the community can come together at the Spitalfields Market to work on the continuous reweaving of a flag, thereby engaging in a continuous conversation on the evolving image of community through time. She argued that as a multicultural society, we define ourselves in terms of histories and exchanges, which lead to our present position, and the flags should represent these processes of dividing and rejoining. For Pedretti, equally as important as setting up these processes was making them explicit and externalising them, as it was the task of artists, makers and designers to provide new models to think through emerging complexity.

She used her property ownership to protest how the government was making decisions about the public in a not-so-public manner (the case of The Crossrail Bill). Although the house's restoration process was never completed, it acts to this date as a site of resistance against the broader defuturing processes brought about by the gentrification process. Pedretti's work enables an engagement with critiques leveraged on the limitations of western liberal concepts of autonomy and representational

conversational participation emerging from within pluriversal discourses, which, in turn, call for greater awareness of the challenges of composing differences (Escobar, 2018).

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Figure 1. Pedretti at working on the multicultural flag, source: Annetta Pedretti archives.



Figure 2. Princelet Street 25, source: <https://houseofannetta.org/>.

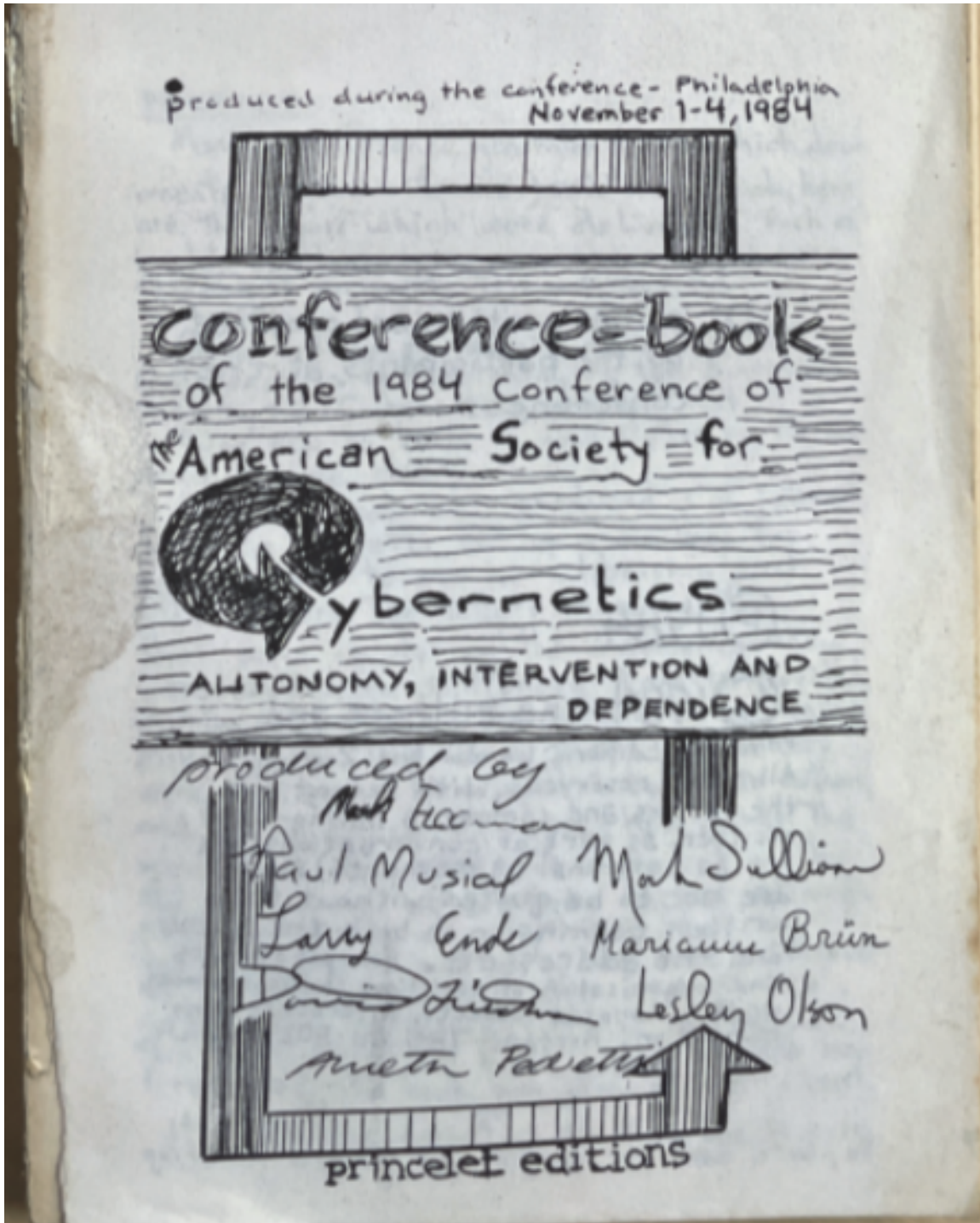


Figure 3. Cover page of the conference book, source: Anetta Pedretti archives.

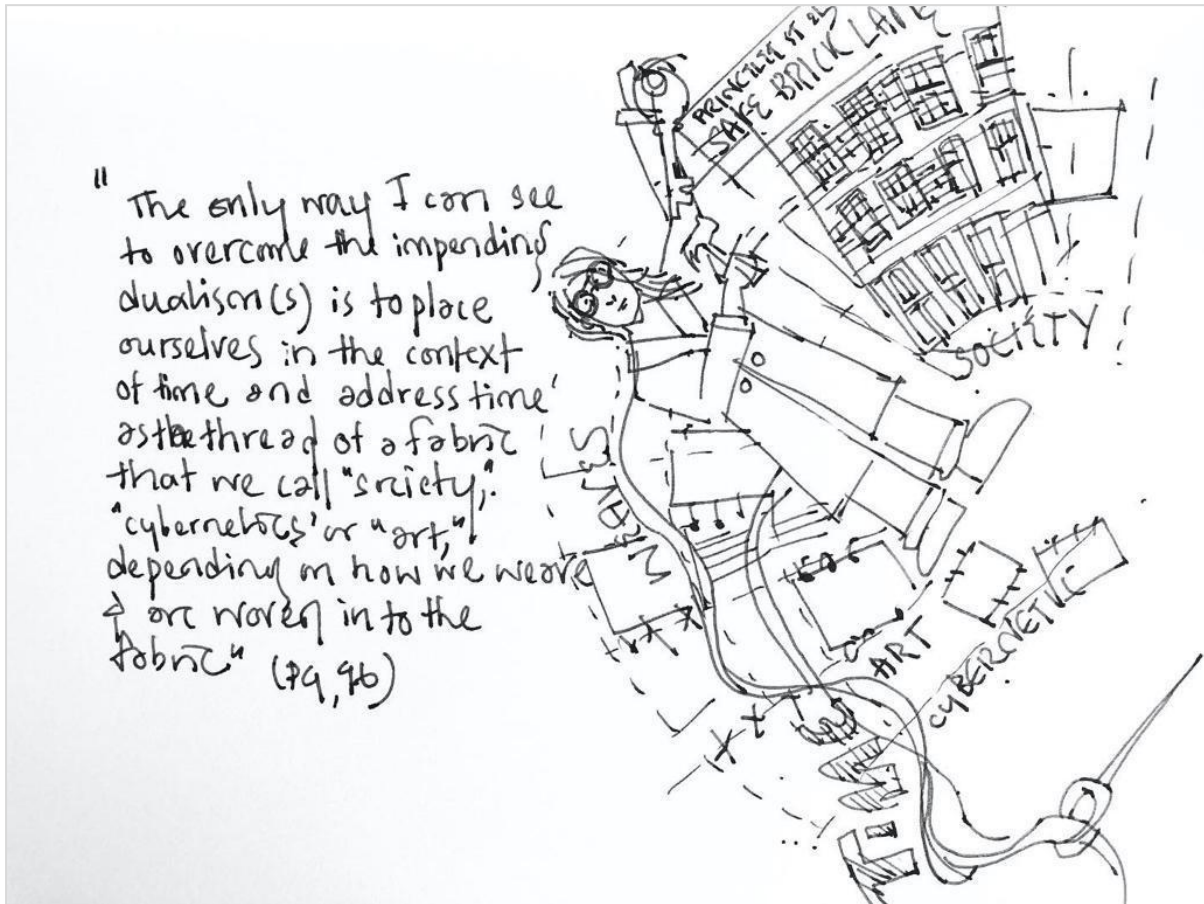


Figure 4. Sketches on excerpts in Pedretti's essay *In the context of time*, source: author.