

100 Chairs
in 100 Days

Martino
Gamper

RMIT Design Hub
Project Rooms 1 & 2, Level 2

26 February – 9 April, 2016



100 Chairs in 100 Days: Martino Gamper Unmaking and Re-making as Design Research

Renowned for his cross-disciplinary and culturally responsive approach to design, London-based Martino Gamper first came to international acclaim with *100 Chairs in 100 Days*. In this project Gamper collected disused chairs from alleyways and friends' homes and reassembled them — one per day — into poetic and often humorous forms. Since its first iteration in London, *100 Chairs in 100 Days* has travelled to Dusseldorf, Milan, San Francisco, Firminy, Athens, Marugame and now, for the first time, to Australia at RMIT Design Hub.

100 Chairs in 100 Days is an ongoing experiment in transforming limitations into possibilities. Perhaps less well known, however, is that this progressive project entails the making of a new 100th chair fabricated within a single day in each city.

To make the 100th chair here in Melbourne, Gamper gathered an array of materials sourced from a community call-out for pre-loved objects, as well as from discarded materials found here at Design Hub and across the city. The 'spine' of the new chair is an elegant timber and steel spring reclining mechanism extracted from a well-loved vintage chair gleaned from the Presbyterian parish in Williamstown; legs and back are re-appropriated from a single damaged plywood 'trio sled' chair as specified by architect Sean Godsell for Design Hub's public spaces and, finally, the seat is crafted and composed from offcuts of local timbers including walnut and spotted gum found within RMIT University's workshops.

Not just chairs

For Gamper, the process of unmaking is integral to the process of re-making a new 100th chair. In the workshop, Gamper examines the materials and with careful consideration disassembles them and lays out the parts, piece by piece. Ideas start to form and coalesce with the careful deconstruction of found objects, exposing the scars of their history and revealing its new possibilities. Within this process, Gamper discovers and understands who designed the object, how well it was designed, how it was constructed, what the material is, and so on.

In re-contextualising and re-imagining the chair, Gamper's process is simultaneously intuitive and experimental, yet cemented within craftsmanship and his experience in making. He test-fits things together with tape and clamps, measures and re-measures, experimenting from different angles and various configurations until he is satisfied with a composition that makes a new contribution to the original collection and reveals something new.

For Gamper, the chair is not simply a chair. It is a deliberate research device from which to reflect upon his practice and consider the wider social implications of design. As he states: "A chair is an object representative of our everyday lives. As consumers, we buy, use and then — when we find something we like better — we release objects for new ones. Chairs seem to go through this evolution very quickly. What you find on the street speaks to the ideas that society has rejected – it reveals something about our culture and the direction that we are taking as a community."

At RMIT Design Hub Gamper expands his exploration of the socio-political context of *100 Chairs in 100 Days* by leading a cross-disciplinary workshop with 14 designers, architects, artists and researchers invited from across Australia. The three-day intensive will culminate in a satellite exhibition on Level 3 of Design Hub, further reflecting upon the ideas inherent within *100 Chairs in 100 Days* and seeding new opportunities for exchange.

Fleur Watson
Curator, RMIT Design Hub

Upon his arrival in Melbourne and in conversation with Design Hub Curator, Fleur Watson, Martino Gamper reflects upon the impact of *100 Chairs in 100 Days* on his expanding practice.

Fleur Watson:

100 Chairs in 100 Days is a long-term project — initially launched in 2007. Now nearly ten years on, what do you think you have learnt from the project and how has it continued to impact upon your ongoing practice?

Martino Gamper:

Looking back, I can see that the project has taught me that research is a very important part of a practice. The project was not commissioned in any formal way and there was no direct reason or client involved. It was driven by a very simple idea that was self-initiated and by instinct. The project highlighted the importance of carving out the time and space to continue to research.

By focusing on a singular element — a chair — and spending focused time on the project — 100 days — I learnt so much. Now, almost ten years later, these are ideas that my practice still draws upon — ergonomics, materials, mixing styles, improvisation — so the impact is still quite big.

The impact of this project was also external — it put me on the design map and communicated to the

outside world a process and approach to design that was something quite different than what was being shown in design shows and magazines at the time.

FW: In the book that accompanies the exhibition — *100 Chairs in 100 Days and its 100 Ways* — there's a short essay by Deyan Sudjic that describes the chair as having taken on an authority of its own, as distinct from the people who sit in it. There are seats of power, there are chairpersons, there are tenured chairs, hot seats and so on.¹ Was choosing the chair as a typology a deliberate move, or could it have been another singular object?

MG: Yes it was deliberate. A chair is an object in our everyday lives. It holds our weight and responds to our bodies. Over time, it can become symbolic of who we are — almost as a reflection of ourselves, our style, age and preferences. Chairs reveal our intentions and anticipate what is going to happen in the space through the way we arrange and use them as functional props for our behaviour.

Chairs support the functions of the everyday — we read, watch, eat, sleep in them.

Yet you can also find chairs discarded on the street even when they are not useless. When I looked around, I realised chairs were the most prominent thrown away objects. As consumers, we buy, use and then

1. Deyan Sudjic, "Deyan Sudjic", *100 Chairs in 100 Days and its 100 Ways*, ed. Martino Gamper, 3rd ed, London: Dent-de-Leone, 2012, p. 33.

— when we find something we like better — we release them for a new thing. Chairs seem to go through this evolution very quickly. What you find on the street speaks to the ideas that society has rejected — it reveals something about our culture and the direction that we are taking as a community.

Chairs are a pretty good example of us, wherever we live in the world — they leave a trace, they have a layout, they leave a good picture about what has happened.

FW: The notion of ‘making’ is very much part of your process but equally the process of unmaking — taking a piece apart and understanding the way it has been considered and composed by understanding its scars. How important is this process of ‘unmaking’ to your practice?

MG: Yes, I think the unmaking is an important part of the process. Firstly, finding a chair on the street and choosing whether or not you pick it up. That is where my imagination starts... what is the potential for this object I have found? Then in the studio, when I’ve brought all these chairs into the space, I deconstruct them, discovering and understanding who designed the object, how well it was designed, how it was constructed, what the material is and so on.

You also discover how people fix things over the years by adding screws or string or other materials to find ways of modifying the object. By taking away the layers you can see the construction of the chair underneath. So much of the design is in the underbelly of a chair — how

the connections and fixings are made in a very particular way. In some cases it is thinking about how the workers in a factory would have put the components together and how elaborate that process was — it’s studying the morphology of the chair.

In the unmaking or taking apart, I also find a way to deal with parts rather than the whole chair, which, in turn, makes a more interesting starting point. It is much easier for me to imagine elements rather than dealing with a single object of a whole chair.

In such instances I cut the chairs. For example with the Jasper Morrison ‘Air Chair’, I cut through the cross-section of the chair to see what was inside. It’s made of a plastic — polypropylene — through a gas-injected process. What’s interesting to understand is what you don’t see — the inside — what’s created through this process. And then, compare that to the Ikea copy of the Morrison chair. What are the differences in process and result?

So, yes, you can see that the process of taking the chairs apart is as important as the start of the process of making the new chair — it creates a clean slate, or a *tabula rasa*.

FW: ‘Making’ in a contemporary context is now something often associated with the ‘democracy’ prescribed to new technologies — 3D printers, co-design and ‘maker spaces’ etc. What relationship — if any — do you feel your work has within this context?

MG: I think every new process that becomes more readily available creates an opportunity for a new perspective

on design and making. However, I do think it is important that the idea is not generated just for the sake of using modern technologies.

For example, twenty years ago when desktop publishing software first became available, everyone was suddenly a graphic designer. From the first moment of working with Photoshop everyone was using all the filters. It was just about playing with the effects rather than really investigating what Photoshop could actually do to support design ideas. I think we can see some of the same kind of issues in the early days of 3D printing. But the interesting thing is when we can really use the tool in combination with other processes and contexts.

For me new technology becomes very interesting when combined with conventional technologies. Today when we went to the Design Hub workshop and saw the work being made using a robot and a bandsaw, I was thinking: “Why is the bandsaw there?” Because, by itself, the bandsaw is pretty stupid – it does one thing very well; a bit like Photoshop in a way. And, to a degree, the same can be true of the robot. When it becomes a tool combined with other tools and even within a matrix of tools, that’s when it becomes exciting. When you mix the digital with the handmade, they work together and yet question each other so you can really learn from the process.

FW: A key aspect of the *100 Chairs* project is that you make a new 100th chair (within the constraint of a single day) for every iteration of the exhibition,

and on location in that particular city as the show travels. How might the 100th chair you produced in Marugame, Japan be different than the one you might make in Melbourne, Australia for example? How do you draw these cultural differences out in the chairs through the composition and materials?

MG: When I meet the chairs again within a new city and context, I feel a bit like the ‘father figure’ of the chairs in a way. When they go back into their crates and move on I kind of forget about them and then when they emerge again, I really look at them and reconnect. Every time is different.

Seeing the architecture of each city and the context that the chairs will be displayed within has an affect on the making of the 100th chair. The space the chairs will occupy — the lighting, textures, the floor — all influence the process of making. Each of the 100th chairs recalls a particular place — the source of the materials, taking things apart, putting them together, placing them in the context of the other chairs. Each chair is a synthesis of the travelling, the making and the conversations that I had in that place.

FW: In a recent article for *Mono. Kultur* you describe the importance of design curation as being contextual rather than simply a “lifestyle presentation within the structure of marketing.”² How do you place design in a more politically and culturally engaged context?

MG: For me, the idea of showing one of my chairs or tables on a pedestal in a museum absolutely gives me

2. Martino Gamper *All Channels Personal*, “True Ugliness can be a treat”, *Mono. Kultur.*, #32, Summer 2012, p. 20.

goosebumps — I think this is the worst way of showing design. Whenever I am thinking about an exhibition I try to contextualise the work within life so the furniture is never shown in a way that looks like a showroom — a graveyard. Chairs, particularly, are made for use within a context. A lot of the time you see furniture de-contextualised and photographed within a white background with no people etc. There is no story; it's a one-liner. Yet, like most objects in the world, chairs are part of a story and connected to a social, political context — furniture effects how people live, what happens in our houses, our public spaces, what we put on our table etc.

One thing that I always find interesting with *100 Chairs* is that people always want to buy the chairs as the show travels. In fact, they are now owned by a gallery so they stay as a collection but I always find it really interesting that people are so keen to buy them even though they are made of rubbish. So by changing things by just five degrees and showing the objects in a new light, it can really capture people's imagination.

FW: Your exhibition *Martino Gamper: design is a state of mind* at the Serpentine Sackler (2014) seemed to work on two levels — firstly, as a very personalised view into the designers minds via the objects that inspired them and secondly, through a historical lens, reminding us that design ideas sit within the context of

history rather than fashion or style. Was this a deliberate intent?

MG: Not intentionally. It evolved in this way. I was looking for a narrative or experience that meant that someone could go to the exhibition and just look at one small element of it — one shelf or five objects — so that small element of interest would simply be enough. Alternatively, another person might go to the exhibition and study all of the shelving and look at each object within the entire exhibition. I wanted multiple ways to see and experience the exhibition.

I also wanted to develop the exhibition through a particular object — in this case the shelves — and in the context of design history but that became less important as the concept evolved. I came up with the idea that I would source objects from the private collections of other designers and artists — many of them I knew — and, in this way, I was relying on their curiosity to reveal how objects and collections inspire their work and process.

It was very unconventional but I thought that both elements really helped each other to communicate the ideas — the shelves and objects were kind of talking to each other in a way. This is what great design is — when many disparate objects are put together in the context of one another to tell us something about our place in the world; design is not something that is only 'right now' or sourced from a catalogue.

100. *Circle and Turtle*
2015/6/10

100 Chairs in 100 Days
Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma
Museum of Contemporary Art
Marugame, Japan
13 JUN – 23 SEP 2015

100. *Niketino*
2013/6/4

100 Chairs in 100 Days
Benaki Museum
Athens, Greece
06 JUN – 28 JUL 2013

FW: I visited your studio in London and it is clear that you have a particularly strong extended community that exists around you, including your wife artist Francis Upritchard, a young designer in your studio Gemma Holt (and by extension her partner Max Lamb) and your long standing collaboration with graphic designers Åbåke. It seems the very antithesis of the celebrity culture that can surround design. How do you see this extended community as contributing to your work and process?

MG: I have always felt the interest in collaborating with others. At university in Vienna, we formed a student group called USP so that we could break away from college and do our own thing while still being a collective. So looking back I think I have always needed the space outside of an institution to develop my own work, but I also needed people to develop ideas collaboratively — I quickly realised that by sharing ideas I got a lot further and learned much more.

When I was at the Royal College of Art, London (RCA), Ron Arad was leading the design products course and he always made sure the young designers were sharing a very small, intimate space. It created a very intense environment and we were very competitive with each other but we also shared and helped each other, so it was a healthy competition. I think that experience really taught me how to work openly with other people. It was very hands on and process driven and we were not



100. Golden Gate
2010/7/7

Techno CRAFT
Yerba Buena
San Francisco, USA
10 JUL – 10 OCT 2010

100. USO
2009/5/10

UFO
The NRW-Forum
Dusseldorf, Germany
23 MAY – 05 JUL 2009

scared to try all sorts of methods and not be too precious with ideas. *100 Chairs* is an extension of this thinking — it is the same brief one hundred times over so after a few days you lose any preciousness about succeeding; you stop worrying about whether the chair looks good.

Later when I went back to the RCA to teach, this thinking really meant that I saw young designers like Gemma and Max as part of the community and working with them gives you a new perspective.

I guess I wanted to make a little family in London — we all kind of needed each other, as London at the time was quite tough for a designer to survive. Maybe it is an Italian thing too.

FW: Our intent at Design Hub is very centred around the notion of exchanging ideas — we like to take risks, experiment and ‘perform’ the process of developing design ideas with our audience. The *Post Forma* workshop that you will lead here at Design Hub directly reflects this intent as a kind of ‘rapid response’ to the touring component of the project. What are your aspirations for the workshop?

MG: Teaching is never about influencing people in terms of form. I have never believed in telling people what to design. It is more about interfering at the right moment, having a conversation and giving people the opportunity to discuss what they are doing. When you are designing you are in a forest and often you simply can't see the wood for the trees. Sometimes teaching is simply



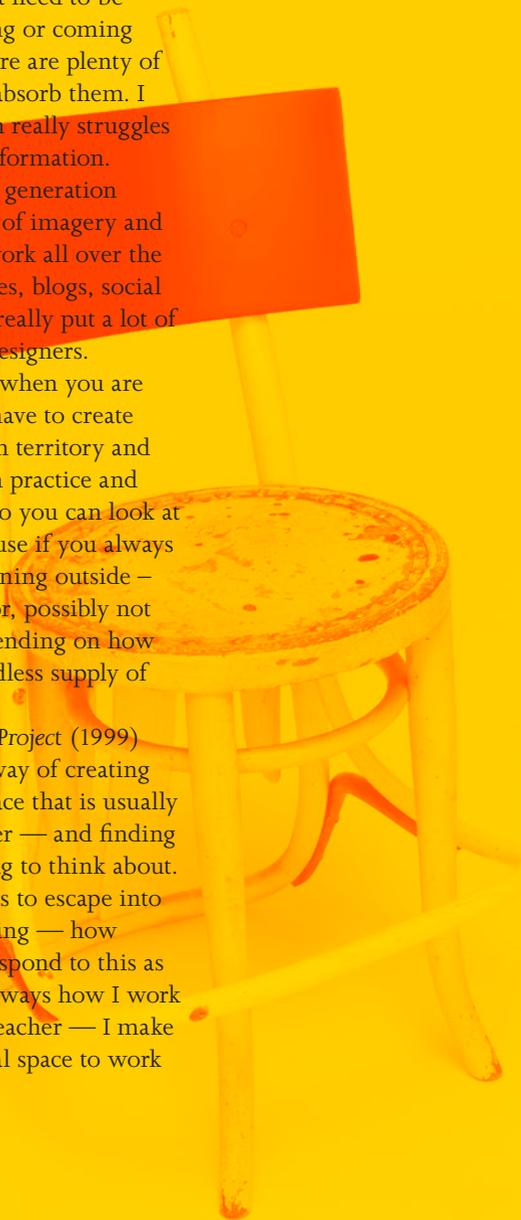
showing students what is around them — contextualising the work.

I see my role as taking away any idea of being too precious — as designers we don't need to be worried about finding or coming up with ideas, as there are plenty of places around us to absorb them. I think this generation really struggles with the influx of information. Of course, each new generation struggles but the sea of imagery and information about work all over the world via the websites, blogs, social media etc. seems to really put a lot of pressure on young designers.

I think that when you are trying to work you have to create a platform, your own territory and a space for your own practice and research to operate so you can look at it more clearly. Because if you always look to what's happening outside — you are too critical or, possibly not critical enough, depending on how you interpret the endless supply of images.

The Corners Project (1999) at the RCA was my way of creating space — taking a space that is usually ignored — the corner — and finding something interesting to think about. Corners can be places to escape into or they can be isolating — how might you start to respond to this as a designer? This is always how I work as a designer and a teacher — I make a mental and physical space to work within.

Melbourne
09.02.2016



100. *Franzele*
2009/5/14

Stanze e Camere +
100 Chairs in 100 Days
Triennale Design Museum
Milano, Italy
06 OCT–08 NOV 2009

100. *The Flying Chair*
2007/9/25

100 Chairs in 100 Days
5 Cromwell Place
London, UK
02–15 OCT 2007

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Post Forma: Martino Gamper
— Workshop & Exhibition

Post Forma: Martino Gamper is a workshop led by Martino Gamper with RMIT Design Hub in collaboration with local practitioner Paul Marcus Fuog. A group of invited designers, architects, artists and researchers have come together over three days to take part in a workshop of collaborative making and ideas exchange that explores cultural diversity in Melbourne. The workshop takes *100 Chairs in 100 Days* as a 'leaping off' point and culminates in an accompanying exhibition in Design Hub's Project Room 3. The exhibition comprises of an installation of ideas, mock-ups and prototypes that presents new possibilities for objects as a driver for social reflection and cross-cultural exchange.

Outcomes from the workshop will be exhibited Thursday 3 March–Saturday 9 April.

Project Room 3, Level 3
RMIT Design Hub
10am–6pm

Public conversation with
Martino Gamper

Join Martino Gamper for a public conversation with special guests. Gamper will give insight into his process-driven practice and the making of *100 Chairs in 100 Days*.

Friday 26 February
Lecture Theatre, Level 2
RMIT Design Hub
6.30pm
Free!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

100 Chairs in 100 Days: Martino Gamper

A project by Martino Gamper
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Nilufar Gallery
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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Martino Gamper making the
100th chair for RMIT Design Hub,
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RMIT DESIGN HUB TEAM

Curators: Fleur Watson, Kate Rhodes
Creative Producer: Nella Themelios
Exhibition Technician: Erik North
Technical Assistants: Timothy McLeod,
Robert Jordan, Sam Fagan, Michael
Wilson
Exhibition Assistants: Kate Riggs,
Chloë Powell

RMIT WORKSHOPS

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THANK YOU

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Ron Ellazam
Boom Studios

RMIT DESIGN HUB

Location:
Corner Victoria and Swanston Streets
Carlton, 3053
hello.designhub@rmit.edu.au
www.designhub.rmit.edu.au

Opening hours:

Tuesday–Friday, 11am–6pm
Saturday, 12pm–5pm
Closed Sunday, Monday and Public
Holidays
Admission is free

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100. Linzer Schmitte
2011/11/23

100 Chairs in 100 Days
Eglise Saint-Pierre
Site Le Corbusier
Firminy, France
24 NOV–27 FEB 2011

100⁺

The 100th
chair changes
with each
exhibition
as a new one
is made for
each new
context.