Destroying the Ordinary for the Extraordinary

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ABSTRACT

Product designers are trained to extend control over the objects they design: control of form, of their use-scenario, their production and hopefully their ecological demise as well. In a market-driven world, designers are often called upon to design extraordinary objects, objects that will stand out against competition, that will draw attention to themselves and their owners and carve out a spot for themselves on a store shelf or in contemporary culture. There are many ways to go about designing the extraordinary: upgrading materials, creating surprising new forms, inventiveness in usability, and so on. At the very extreme edge of tactics that can be employed here, counterintuitively, is that of destroying something in order to give it value.

KEY WORDS: Extraordinary; destroy; product design; value; Ron Arad; Pressed Flowers; Do; cut ceramic; Maarten Baas; Smoke.

DESTRUYENDO LO ORDINARIO POR LO EXTRAORDINARIO.

RESUMEN

Los diseñadores de productos están capacitados para extender el control sobre los objetos que diseñan: control de la forma, de su escenario de uso, su producción y, con suerte, también su desaparición ecológica. En un mundo impulsado por el mercado, a menudo se pide a los diseñadores que diseñen objetos extraordinarios, objetos que se destaquen frente a la competencia, que llamen la atención sobre ellos mismos y sus dueños y se hagan un hueco en los estantes de las tiendas o en la cultura contemporánea. Hay muchas maneras de diseñar lo extraordinario: mejorar los materiales, crear nuevas formas sorprendentes, inventiva en la usabilidad, etc. En el borde más extremo de las tácticas que se pueden emplear aquí, en contra de la intuición, está la de destruir algo para darle valor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Extraordinario; destruir; diseño de producto; valor; Ron Arad; Flores Prensadas; Do; corte de cerámica; Maarten Baas; Smoke.*

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DESIGN FIELDS

The term "Product Design" classically describes the field, both academic and professional, of the seeing-through of an object from the conceptual stage and all the way through to its physical realization. This will usually be in the context of commerce and often include things such as defining a need, market research, field observations, design alternatives, usability, human factors, form-giving, prototyping and field testing, visual communications, engineering and material definitions, fabrication technology, use scenario, service, and marketing. The term has, over the past couple of decades, expanded to be used to describe products that are non-tangible, non-physical outcomes as well. With this in mind Product Design can describe the process of creating a service or digital tool. The Royal College in London went as far as to establish an MA program renamed to "Design Products" so as to highlight the thinking behind the outcome, and at the same time broadening the scope of acceptable outcomes (Furniss L, 2015). It is

no longer about the design of a product but about anything that is an outcome of design thinking, and thereby the focus has changed. The design of processes that will eventually lead to outcomes is part of this shift in focus. This same process or thinking is now also used outside the traditional consumerist or functionalist "problem-to-solution" realm, as a means of personal artistic expression, as a means of speculating on alternative futures, experimenting with form or materials, or critiquing anything from gene-editing to sociopolitical injustices or consumerism itself (Dunne A and Raby F, 2013).

The field of Product Design will often use observations on objects accepted as "ordinary" or "extraordinary" in order to understand why they are perceived as such. The underlying motivation is that if the mechanism for our reaction to an object could be understood, then any object could be purposely designed to be one or the other and elicit the desired reaction. Hence, what factors into evaluating an object in terms of "ordinary" or "extraordinary"? Both the person perceiving the object and the object itself are parts of the equation as is the context of the interaction.

Product designers mediate technologies and facilitate the meeting of mass-produced products with people, constructing the object world around us by designing anything from cars to knives, from smartphones to chairs. In a commercial Product Design process, typically a "design brief" will be drafted to direct the product's development along agreed-upon guidelines. Some of these guidelines will likely include physical constraints, preferred manufacture technologies and materials, human factors directives and so on. Sometimes these guidelines can be interpreted (or even explicitly state) that the design should be "extraordinary", or perhaps "ordinary" will be called for.

Take for example the design of new medical equipment/upgraded implement, revolutionizing, or introducing an inventive surgical procedure. While what the implement does may be "extraordinary" in medical terms, a communicative, familiar, or simply put, "ordinary" physical realization of the tool, is likely called for so as to easily communicate itself to the surgeon. A familiar design language will hasten and increase the likelihood of the product's reception and use in hospitals.

Designers are often in a race to push boundaries, to create extraordinary new objects, objects never before seen that will differentiate themselves from the ones already in existence. There are many ways to go about designing the extraordinary: upgrading materials, creating surprising new forms, inventiveness in usability, for example.

At the very extreme edge of tactics that can be employed here, counterintuitive, is that of destroying something in order to give it value.

What does it mean to be extraordinary? "Assigned value" is at the core of being extraordinary: it is a fluid concept such that an object may shift back-and-forth between being ordinary and extraordinary. An extraordinary object can slip into the ordinary through overexposure, or the ordinary may be revered as extraordinary when context changes, as in geographical relocation.

"Extraordinary" often brings with it "awe", a positive differentiation from the lot. In order for an object to be "extraordinary", we must first have the "ordinary" as a reference point (as linguistics implies). Similarly, the act of destroying has to be employed for something that already exists: one must first have an ordinary object to destroy, design a destructive process, and only then hope to have achieved an extraordinary outcome.

For the sake of this latter perspective, "destroy" will be treated as an act that renders an object incapable of performing the prime function for which it was originally created, or at least dethroning that function. Taking a mundane product and actively changing it with the intention of creating something extraordinary may or may not succeed, but inevitably, if only momentarily, that product will become "ex-ordinary".

A ship when purposely dynamited and sunk to create a reef attraction for scuba divers, has in an instance lost its buoyancy and ability to travel on water. From an anonymous vessel (with little or no perceived value – otherwise it would still be plying the oceans…) it has been transformed into an extraordinary shipwreck, likely drawing many sea creatures and people to be amazed by it.

There are many examples of the exercise of this tactic used to boost underwater tourism. This includes the sinking of the 160m long ex-military missile-tracking ship, the USNS Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the second largest vessel to ever be purposely sunk. After being retired in 1983, its transformation to extraordinary finally took place in 2009 off Key West, Florida. (Florida Keys & Key West, 2020)

To further exemplify value gained by destructive action in design, let's look at a couple more case-studies and through their specificity perhaps gain further insight on the transformation to extraordinary. The instances selected here are all from the Design-Art/Experimental Design realm, where personal and often expressive works by designers are realized, then shown at museums and galleries (or even collected) where they can be contemplated and reflected upon. The following works all began with consumer products as their point-of-origin, then forces were introduced such as crushing, cutting, and burning, thereby significantly altering the originals. As such, the "material" from which they are made are off-the-shelf products, and due to the museological context into which they are born they are also Ready Made-based works (MOMA Learning, 2020), solidifying their status as "objects for discussion" (as opposed to "objects for use" as in the functionalist sense).

RON ARAD, *PRESSED FLOWERS*, 2013, 2018

Tel-Aviv-born and London-based designer, Ron Arad, has for many years been one of the more expressive and prolific designers on the international design scene, working on projects as diverse as one-off furniture, mass-produced products, interior design as well as buildings.

He is probably best known for his limited edition, volumetric sheet metal furniture with characteristic, simultaneously elegant and chunky clear sculptural forms.

In 2013, Arad showcased a new series of works titled *Pressed Flowers,* part of his one-man show *In Reverse* at the Design Museum Holon (incidentally also a building he had designed).

The works consisted of Fiat 500 automobiles that had been crushed and hung on the museum walls, like giant swatted mosquitoes (Figs. 1,2,3). Actual automobiles meticulously prepared, were placed into an industrial 500-ton shipyard press located in the Netherlands and then flattened to an almost two-dimensional cartoon state. A few years later the same shipyard press was used to crush an additional series of USA-branded vehicles, e.g., Buick, Dodge, Chrysler…

Industrial presses are often employed to compact metal products or metal waste into cubes which are then more economical to store and transport on their way to being smelted. Pressure destroys the form, and later heat destroys any remaining memory of structure. Years prior, Arad had created a work (*Sticks and Stones*, 1987) that was in itself a small-scale metal compacting press, inviting viewers to toss chairs or other metal parts into it and experience pleasure at the deformed metal cube expelled at the end of the process (Sudjic D, 1999). He is quite aware of the attraction of this massive compacting force.

Ziva Sternhell, in her paper '*Ron Arad: In Reverse'* (2015) ties this attraction to historic cultural context: "[…] his (Arad.ed) attention to an esthetic of destruction, which in the (museum.ed) catalogue he describes as "thrilling chaos" is in the same way inherent to the eighteenth-century romantic tradition, and most familiarly evoked in depictions of ruins"[1].

Though Arad himself prefers to tie the destructive force to an autobiographical event, his father's narrow escape from death in an automobile accident during Arad's childhood. A destructive force extended on an automobile has a profound place in Arad's memory, but he also sees beauty in its manifestation: "Accidents are things that happen. Normally it's a bad thing...but if you look, every landscape [….] every spectacular (like) valley or whatever…canyon, is the result of some accident…of something that moved and then – it's up to us to see and enjoy the beauty of it" [2].

The field of automotive design, part of the world of product design, has a tradition of focusing on aesthetics and attraction. Car designers regularly deal with "trapping motion" – sculpting "speed" into the metal body of a car, so that even when parked we will read a Ferrari as "fast". This is at the core of the craft of styling. Arad is employing the same thinking, the same craft, by orchestrating the trapping of the destructive press' force within the Fiat's metal body.

"It's about taking things that exist, functional useful things, and making them not functional and not useful, taking a 3D piece and turning it into a two-dimensional [...]".[3] In order to convince the original owners of the Fiat 500s, who were in the process of restoring them, to sell him the automobiles, Arad told them of his plans for the Fiats but insisted "We're not destroying the cars, we're immortalizing them".[4]

Had the cars been obliterated they would not have been immortalized, but destroying them just enough has likely set them on the road to immortality. They can no longer drive, sit people, or even take up a parking space, but there are still Fiat 500s and they will likely live on as encapsulated culture, on museum walls and in collectors' homes. (Fig. 4).

AMI DRACH AND DOV GANCHROW, *DO; CUT CERAMIC* SERIES, 2012

Design duo, Ami Drach and Dov Ganchrow first showed their *Do* project at the Tel-Aviv Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center in 2012. The *Do* series of works consisted of found white ceramic vessels that had been cut so as to remove the vessels volume leaving only its central spine. Two parallel, off-center cuts with a diamond-coated saw removed most of the vessels' material and with it the ability to contain. Teacups, vases, saltshakers, plates, pitchers and teapots lost their ability to function, yet gained a clear and distilled aesthetic character.

The ceramic products were sourced, in the main, from the old city of Jaffa's lively flea market where the sale of fine nineteenth century porcelain on a sheet spread over the sidewalk, rests in nestled comfort with last year's ceramic IKEA crop. Only solid-white color ceramic vessels were used so as not to distract from the vessels' new highlighted form and structure.

Why destroy a perfectly good teapot? What is to be gained? While undoubtedly there may be some hidden gems to be found in the flea market, some extraordinary finds, the majority of the wares are fairly mundane, having been released by previous owners for lack of value. The ceramic products sourced here for the project were no exception.

The act of cutting exposes the very technical aspects of object making; wall thickness, interfacing of parts, structural ribs *etc*. A traditional Design discipline backbone, the "Section", is to the product designer what the "Plan" is to the architect, a chance to see with clarity the essence of the design. (Fig.5).

Display of the works followed one of two themes: the sectioned objects' reassembly along a narrative such as that of a festive dinner, or, as a typological study, such as that of the teapots shown during the 2013 Seventh Ceramics Biennale at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel- Aviv (Fig. 8). The objects' reduced forms lend themselves well to a typological comparative discourse.

Ordinary ceramic vessels having their bodies and functionality cut from them have gained the ability to travel from obscurity and into the design collections of such museums as the George Pompidou Center in Paris and the Swiss MUDAC design museum.

Similarly, and on a larger scale, as part of the New Dutch Waterfront project, the Netherlands RAAAF and Atelier Lyon cut open a WWII fortification known as *Bunker 599*. The bunker, one of seven hundred bunkers that made up an historic line of defense, had its midsection cut away revealing its massive, fortified concrete wall thicknesses and cavities. As a strategic and protective bunker, it has been destroyed, but as an architectural and cultural asset it has been elevated and integrated into a rejuvenated contemporary landscape. In the words of brothers and founders of RAAAF, Erik and Ronald Rietveld: "Paradoxically, after the intervention Bunker 599 became a Dutch national monument, so it "increased" in monumental value"[5].

"Instead of just halting decay, we argue that one should aim at *generating meaning* from the old for current and future generations"[6].

"Contrary to conservative historical preservation, this approach is not concerned with recreating or preserving the way an object might have looked like in the past, *e.g.*, in 1940 (which results in a historical artifact), but rather focuses on generating meaning from multiple layers of history, meaning both for people now and in the future. Through deliberate destruction, radical changes in context, and seemingly contradictory additions, a new field of tension arises between present, past and future that activates built heritage, instead of "extracting" it from history and putting it on a pedestal"[7].
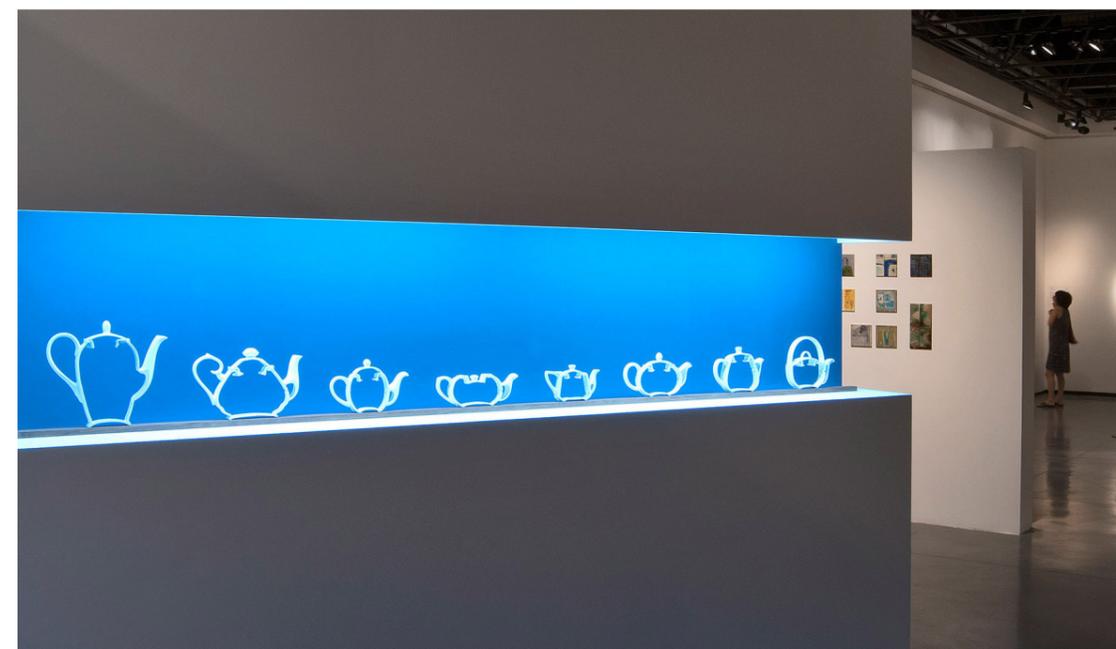
The teapot (or any other vessel) is reduced to an almost-two-dimensional version of itself, an almost graphic representation of the teapot's character. In fact, the project's name, "Do", is a wordplay, simultaneously implying *active making* (English) as well as implying two-dimensionality ("*Do*" in Hebrew means *two*, and often used in professional context as short for "*Do meymahd*" – or *two-dimensions*). (Figs. 6, 7).

Fire is a powerful tool: it can smelt iron, erase cities and was instrumental in myriad ways in our evolution. Humankind will probably forever be fascinated and hypnotized by it, and it is only natural that there will be continuity in finding ways to keep it close – and under control. Fire has been embedded in the *Smoke* objects and one continues to see the fire in the charred skeletal remains, through the story the wood tells.

Baas has added value by exploiting one of wood's greatest fears, and in the process made the objects his own. Fire is this designer's signature of sorts, overwriting any previous signature that may have been associated with the furnishing. A dining chair by an unknown maker, acquired second-hand, has, after burning become a Marteen Baas *Smoke* dining chair, and the famous Rietveld chair has become Marteen Baas' Rietveld chair. (Figs. 11, 12).

Works from the *Smoke* series are found among others, in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Groninger Museum and the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. It is unlikely that a mundane used dining chair would be singled out as extraordinary by a museum collection acquisition committee, had no cultural value been literally burned into it by the designer.

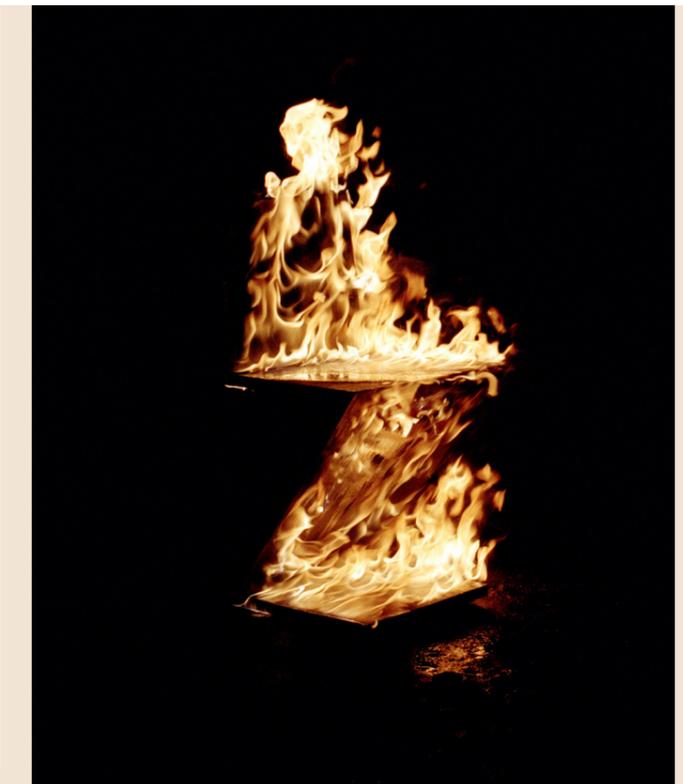## MAARTEN BAAS: *SMOKE,* 2002, 2004

The Dutch designer, Marteen Baas, burns wooden furniture, particularly chairs, but he arrests the charring procedure just short of losing the identity and structural integrity of the furniture, and then embalming them with Epoxy resin. The extraordinary outcomes are brought-back-from-the-dead familiar furnishings, with a somewhat gothic appeal.

The series of works, appropriately named '*Smoke'*, started out as his graduation project at the Netherlands Design Academy Eindhoven in 2002 and kicked-off his design career. Soon after, Dutch design brand Moooi started producing his burnt furniture and Moss Gallery in New York commissioned further burnings. He has since taken his blowtorch to side tables, kitchen tables, chairs, chaise-lounge, chandeliers and even a grandfather clock. He later went on to burn iconic design pieces such as the Zig-Zag Chair (1934) by Dutch designer/architect Gerrit Rietveld, charring not only the wooden chair – but his own national design heritage in the process as well. (Figs. 9, 10).

Since the shift from student to gallery-commissioned designer was also the point where flea-market furniture burnings were replaced with the destruction of collectible designer furniture, the shift can be read as an act of *Potlatch*. This is a ceremonial giving-away or destruction of belongings of value as a means of establishing one's social standing (Drucker P, 1967). The work is no longer merely a recognizable burnt chair, it is a recognizable burnt chair of value and therefore its destruction (irreversible property loss, and risk of failing at obtaining an extraordinary outcome) reflects on the designer wielding the fire, elevating his prestige and professional standing.

EMBODIMENT

It would be wrong to ignore that all the case-study works here were created by designers who also work or were educated within a context of Product Design, designing for masses. So, we must assume an awareness of the greater context of the making of the Ready-Mades used here (manufacturing processes, markets, life-cycles *etc.)*, and hence read an action taken on them, as action taken upon the industrialized consumer market to which these products could possibly belong.

Probably relating in part also to modes of thinking in the design discipline, the above designers found existing products as a comfortable point-of-entry to create something new. The designers also created works in series thereby leveraging what traditional product design does, i.e., produce and manufacture. Works in series divert value from a single object to the thinking about or action taken on the object. It is about burning furniture, not a specific piece of furniture, it is about cutting vessels, not a specific cut vessel. This tactic not only allows for the introduction of additional objects onto a body of work, but it also reduces the expectations from a single ultimate climactic realization, simultaneously emphasizing common denominators and spotlighting differences. It puts order on viewing: there is a point of reference, but also deviations from it become more apparent. If an action were taken only on a single Ready-Made it would leave the viewer with no tool to create separation and hierarchy in what was being perceived and contemplated.

The destroying action simultaneously loads an object with energy – or with a story, and at the same time likely evokes an individual outcome. Scars are personal and can give identity to mass-produced products for instance, shifting them from repetitively ordinary to singularly extraordinary. In the words of Ron Arad (2015) when describing his *Pressed Flowers* crushed cars ... "they're all born more or less the same and they were treated…they were punished in the same way, and each one ended up different… there are no two of them that are the same…each one of the cars had a different expression a different sort of mood".[8]

The advancements in digital production technologies today are bringing with them the highly anticipated phenomena of "mass customization", the ability to mass produce individually customized products. This is an overdue response to the attitude expressed in Henry Ford's comment on the Model T car production, "Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black",[9] thereby bluntly placing industry before people.

Analogously, the process Arad uses as described here manifests as a parallel to the related contemporary design phenomena of "parametric design", i.e., with the ability to produce infinite design variations within given constraints. In the case of "parametric design"*,* a series of constraints or guiding logic can be defined, information then fed into the computer algorithm and design variations outputted at the end of the process. Arad's constraints include metal material and the end form being no more than 12 cm thick after pressing. What Arad feeds to his "algorithm" is a Fiat 500, and what is outputted are variations of the crushed automobile. He has designed the process guiding the outcome but is never in full control of any single outcome.

There is often a balance that must be retained by allowing the "ordinary" to peer out from the "extraordinary", and it is usually "form" that retains this connection to the object's previous identity, whether a teapot, bunker, Fiat 500, or anything else. Too much deviation from the familiar when destroying, risks losing the reference and leaving the object illegible. A flattened automobile is still an automobile. If the destructive process were taken too far, we would be left with a puddle of steel inaccessible to the casual viewer (perhaps a lab analysis of the steel alloy could lead back to the automotive industry and a Fiat as a possible victim…). Case-to-point, if the product initially introduced into the destructive process is too obscure, then a communicative message at the end of the process would not exist. But even if the introduced product is initially identifiable along with the cultural baggage it brings, but is destroyed beyond recognition in the process, the story will not have been told (save for any accompanying documentation of the destructive process procedure). Furniture should not be "burned beyond recognition", rather the furniture, the burnt furniture and the burning should be recognizable.

For the story to be told in full by the design work we must also be able to identify the destructive force embedded in the object, just as the tell-tale tooth marks left on a bone or limb informing us at least as much about the predator as about the tissue damage sustained. Burnt wood informs us of fire.

If it is legible, the destructive act lives on in the object as a point in time and an action, fossilized and added to the original object. Though the impacting force (fire, pressure, and so on, was momentary, it continues to exist through the visible physical change it brought on. in Arads words …" you can see something that happened, something that came before, it carries a story with it".[10]

In conclusion, there are simultaneously three things existing in any of these described works: the original product, the new altered object, and the action or force that was embedded in it by the designer. It is this combination taken in context that propels these works into the extraordinary.

NOTAS

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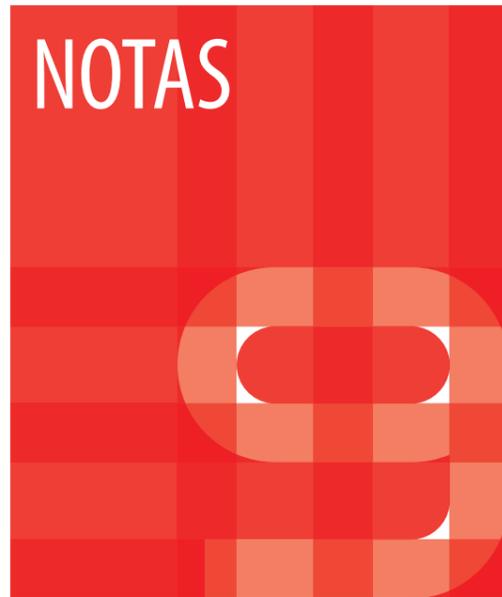
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