

## **Prediction scenarios**

**By Jorge Luis Marzo**

The approach adopted by Maureen Connor and Kadambari Baxi towards their creative collaboration with the company Formica involves an intelligent exploration of the psychosocial models that interface culture has been projecting over recent years.

The main definition of interface culture is that it placed the notion of prediction, of strategy, at the centre of theory and communicative practice. When Galileo jotted onto paper the abstractions that he observed through the telescope; when Leibniz and Pascal configured the first calculating machines; or when military men began to deploy miniature troops on great tables during the course of a battle, a new order was initiated in terms of the relationship that bound the Europeans to the world around them, in the sense that they were attempting to be one step ahead of events so that it would be possible to foresee them and act in consequence. The mental and material technologies developed by modern capitalism over the last century are a logical evolution of the needs for simulation that were created in order to support a society that banked on controlling an increasingly interconnected environment as its guarantee for survival. Strangely enough, though perhaps not so surprising, that interdependence of phenomena and circumstances was brought about by a fundamental imperative in the law of interfaces: their standardisation. Interfaces, languages with which different realities communicate with each other (people with different languages or cultures, machines and human beings, or machine to machine), must all respond to the same patterns, to the same codes, or, to put it within contemporary terminology, must use the same software, an identical protocol.

Formica, a high pressure industrial laminate process composed of chemically treated resins with which polished, resistant, light surfaces were obtained, and onto which decorative designs capable of simulating any material could be printed, to a great extent helped to conceive everyday furniture in terms of modernity. The new plasticated surfaces were no longer a matter of traditional “auratic” materials, but represented visual values that were external to the material itself. The simulation of environments involved at the same time a similar projection of social values and (middle) class expectations, as may easily be perceived in the advertising the company has engaged in over the years. The new material and its ability to produce “non-real” settings/environments even led to new forms of projection in terms of domestic interior design, in the same way almost that photography, in its origins, became a receptacle for homogenised social desires when people began to hang portraits above the fireplace in their homes.

Formica represents a social interface metaphor in the sense that it channels projections and expectations, thus unmaking boundaries between the real and the virtual. Connor and Baxi –who, as is customary in their widely known work, sound out in depth the social and political implications of things– have plumped for entering that metaphor through the critical application of two processes of different natures, but which are similar in their capacity to encapsulate the important questions that are part and parcel of the interface: the *Semacode* programme and the economic prediction method called *Scenario Planning*.

*Semacode* is a “ubiquitous” computing system. By placing a kind of bar code, a crossword-style interface, within a context or a specific object, a mobile phone with a camera can detect its presence and trigger access to a specific web in the telephone browser.

*Scenario Planning*, meanwhile, is a system utilised by economists and executives to imagine different events that would change the world and, therefore, the nature of those products that would be necessary and desirable. Consequently, businesses consider how they must adapt to such possible changes.

These artists propose to use the *Semacode* system, incorporating it at the surface of new materials manufactured by Formica both for public and private spaces, with the aim of dialoguing with the potential audience. Accordingly, their attention focuses on two essential aspects: on the one hand, they analyse the interface as customised, personalised communication, within the framework of a ubiquitous “virtualised” personal reality: “I am no more than a supposition of myself, someone to be presumed”, said Lacan, as Connor reminds us. On the other hand, they take on the new economic dynamics based on the prediction of commercial scenarios, taking into account, however, the potential unleashed by user interactions. Behind all this one finds an issue of capital importance: how to establish forecasts when the actual history of technology so insistently shows us that very often it is the users who imprint upon machines functions somewhat different from those for which they were originally designed? From the certainty that the limits between producers and consumers are being drastically transformed, it is easy to deduce that the determinist, mechanistic language of a good part of industry today must be questioned.